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Miscellaneous: Earl Palmer Sermons

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"God does not send us a cross any heavier than we can bear. How you cope is the important thing, not the events themselves."



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### UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY SPIRIT

#### I) "THE MYSTERY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT"

by  
Rev. Earl F. Palmer

First in a series of sermons preached  
at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley

Mark 1:9-10

April 20, 1975

Today we are going to celebrate together the Lord's Supper. This is a tradition of most reformed churches. We as Christians believe that the Lord's Supper is a time when we are personally assured of the costly love of God for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through this costly love given to us. He unites us together in common love as we receive the gift from our one Lord as he draws us together in himself.

As John Calvin put it, we believe that in the Lord's Supper we experience the real presence of Christ in this communion in a unique way, and that he ministers his love to us in a unique way. This then brings us to a great and vital question about Christian faith itself. I want to ask the question as we celebrate the Lord's Supper--How does God make his love real to each of us here and now in the twentieth century?

For the ten weeks before Easter we as a congregation studied the book of John, and as we looked together into the life of our Lord we saw Jesus Christ in his historical setting. We saw John's witness to Jesus Christ, what he did, and what he said.

Now let us ask the very important question that all the way through that study was really ringing in our ears, or in the back of our brains--How does this Jesus that we have studied about and looked at together and considered the meaning of through the book of John become real to me some 2,000 years later? Here in the twentieth century how do I come to know for sure that

his love, the love that we saw expressed concretely to people, and then expressed on the cross, the victory at Easter--how do we know that love is for us? Now the answer to that question is--the Holy Spirit.

I want us as a congregation to devote these next Sundays to the serious consideration of the subject of the person and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, because it is the Holy Spirit who mediates the real presence of Christ to us in the communion. It is the Holy Spirit who assures us of the love of God in our hearts. It is the Holy Spirit who creates the church. Notice the Apostles' Creed in Article III: "I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting." All these great facts confessed in the Third Article have to do with what God does for us. It talks about the communion of saints; we are the saints. That means our communion with each other, not only here horizontally, but vertically through history and through the future. "The forgiveness of sins" is talking about the forgiveness of our sins. In "the resurrection of the body," the Creed is talking about the resurrection of your body. In the Creed we have already acknowledged the resurrection of Christ. Now we are talking about our resurrection and our future life everlasting. The holy catholic church is the holy universal catholic church of Christ. The Holy Spirit brings the church into being.

Now during these next weeks I want us to come to understand as well as we can, and to think together from the Biblical witness, exactly who is the Holy Spirit and what is his ministry. The last words of Matthew 27 contain the great formula concerning our Lord's command to the church concerning baptism of the Holy Spirit--Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Listen to this great final commission, beginning at the 16th verse: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them, and when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. (Some were still unresolved, but they all worshiped him.) And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.' (Our Lord makes himself the center of their faith). Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, (There we have the great triune formula presented to us in the book of Matthew.) teaching them

to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, (literally the word is look) I am with you always, to the close of the age."

Now in Mark 1, 9 through 10, we hear of the baptism of Jesus. "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'" Once again the triune presence of the Father, the Voice (the Spirit) and Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity, our trinitarian faith, comes to us from throughout the Biblical witness.

Let's ask the questions: Who is this Holy Spirit referred to in Matthew, baptized in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit? Who is this Holy Spirit in Mark 1 who descends upon Christ in his baptism? Is the Holy Spirit the spirit of truth or the spirit of love, the spirit of justice in the world? Is that the Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit the grand extension of our own spirit so that in effect all of you just automatically have the Holy Spirit in you? Or is the Holy Spirit a good feeling, or an energy, or a force, which perhaps we might tap if we have certain secrets? I believe that the answer to all these questions or possibilities is no, and yet I find in talking to Christians and counseling with people who are trying to struggle through the meaning of their own faith that many are saddled with one of these views as far as a working doctrine of the Holy Spirit is concerned. Many people think of the Holy Spirit as sort of the spirit of love, that wherever love is, or wherever truth is, that's all that the Holy Spirit amounts to. Or the Holy Spirit may be the extension of your own spirit, or the Holy Spirit is really a feeling or an energy or force. The answer to all these is no.

To understand who the Holy Spirit is brings us to the very foundation of our trinitarian faith. These two passages I quoted to you from Matthew and from Mark are both pointing up our trinitarian faith. We are trinitarians in the United Presbyterian Church. In fact,

the greater part of Christendom is trinitarian. All Christendom that holds the Nicene and the Apostles' Creed, and, of course, all the great creeds of the reformed, catholic, and orthodox faiths, are trinitarian.

What do we mean when we say trinitarian? It means that we believe in one God--Father, Son, Holy Spirit. We do not believe in three gods. We believe in one God. But the one God who has about his very nature this triune nature, I want us to explore that a little bit this morning, and then think through some implications that will help us to understand the meaning of communion today.

First of all. How do we understand the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? How do we begin to unfold this doctrine of the Holy Spirit? In order to understand the Holy Spirit we go to the very fundamental and foundational beginning of our Christian faith itself, and that is the trinitarian origin of our Christian faith. So if we can understand what Jesus meant by his great commission when he told the church to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, if we can understand that very great text in Mark, and in countless other texts where we have our Lord witnessed to by the Holy Spirit like a dove, and the Father's voice speaking, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." If we can understand this interplay, understand this nature, then we will understand who the Holy Spirit is.

There are two ways to understand trinitarian faith. One is to see our trinitarian faith in terms of how we have experienced God's self-revelation, and the second way is to try somehow to understand trinitarian faith in terms of the history involved. Let's work briefly with both.

First of all, how has God revealed his character to us? The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are endeavoring to express the biblical witness of how God has expressed his character to us. We believe that in the Bible, the Old Testament by anticipation and the New Testament in fulfillment, that God reveals his character in this way. He reveals himself as the one God who is our Father--notice how the Apostles' Creed puts it, our Father, Creator, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. God the Father. The word Father is used in the creed as our Lord uses it to show that the God who is at the center, at the beginning, the God who was before all things, is the God who is I AM--the God who makes himself known. The first time he

identified himself to Moses as "I am who I am. I will be who I will be." The God of character. That's the point. He is the God of personhood--as Chardin puts it "The tenacious personalism" that's God. He is person. He is the Father, Creator, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. He is the One who makes all that there is. You see in the first century there were Gnostics who actually thought the world was created by an inferior god, and then a superior god comes along to redeem the world, separating the god of creation from the god of redemption. That is the very core of Gnosticism. But the Christian faith rejects that. The Christian faith says, no, the God who makes the world in the first place is the God who redeems his creation, while the creation through the use of its freedom ends corrosive and distorted. So we believe in the one God who is the Father. That is Article I of the Apostles' Creed.

If you have your Worship Book you might open it to the inside cover and you can see the Apostles' Creed before you. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;" and then Article II: "And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell;" (That means descended into the place of death, really dying. Again that is put in by the Apostles' Creed about 150 A.D. to make sure that we do not again make the mistake early Gnostics made that Jesus did not really die, but only appeared to die. No, the creed says he really died because the New Testament teaches it.) "The third day" (again in history) "he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." That is Article II.

Let me put Article II in just a little different way. Article II of our faith says that we believe in the one God, Father Almighty, who has spoken for himself in history. Jesus Christ is the very speech of God. The way the Book of John begins: "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. The Word was God and the Word became flesh." The

Word is God's very speech. God in other words has made himself known concretely in history, and Jesus Christ is that Speech. Jesus Christ is God speaking for himself. Someone asks "Well can't I just have a religion with God and not worry about Jesus Christ?" People have said that to me several times. People who do not know, who have never really seen Jesus Christ up close will ask that kind of question, but you cannot have Christian faith without Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God speaking. It is like saying I want to have a belief in God, but I do not want God to talk to me. I do not want God to say anything. I do not want God to make his character known. I want a God without a speech. Impossible! Jesus Christ is God making himself known. If you want to know what God is like according to the New Testament you have to listen to his speech.

Now what about the Third Article? I have already quoted it to you. "I believe in the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit); the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting."

What do we believe about the Holy Spirit? Who is the Holy Spirit? You will notice that in the Third Article after the Holy Spirit is mentioned all the things that have to do with us come into focus, and this gives us our historic understanding of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God making himself known today to us in the continuum of history. Remember in Mark 1 it is the Holy Spirit who assures John and those around as to who Jesus was. He descended upon Jesus; gave a witness as to who Jesus was.

Now let us review our trinitarian faith again as we have discovered who God is. This is trinitarian Christianity. We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth who has spoken for himself in history, Jesus Christ, who still makes that speech known to you today through the Holy Spirit so that when you are able to say "I know Jesus Christ as my Lord" you know it because of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God confirming his speech to you today. That is one way of understanding our trinitarian faith. This is understanding trinitarian faith modalistically in a sense or in terms of the way God has shown himself to us and the way we have perceived it.

Now there is a second way of understanding

trinitarian faith. Let us look at that briefly. Within the Bible we also see glimpses of the mystery of God's inner nature. Now let me give a heavy thought today. The New Testament is teaching that within the very essence of God's character there is fellowship; there is relationship within the very character of God. Now we do not have any human analogy for this because within our one single personality--though we can carry on a kind of dialogue with ourselves it is true, but it is usually not advised over long periods of time to carry on a dialogue with yourself--we do not really have a human analogy that can perceive this mystery. Yet the New Testament, and a great modern theologian--probably the most famous theologian in the world today--Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian in the University of Tübingen--has been trying to grapple with this great mystery in many of his recent writings on the person of Christ and the relationship of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He points out that we see this mystery in the New Testament in a very obvious setting and in a very obvious way, and that is in the prayers of Jesus. The prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and the prayer of our Lord on the cross for instance, gives us a Biblical witness to the fact that there is a relationship existing between Christ and his Father and between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit ministered to Christ in the wilderness. In fact the very first sentence after the Mark 1 passage quoted to you, that the Holy Spirit drove Christ into the wilderness, we are told that the Holy Spirit ministered to Christ in the wilderness, and the Holy Spirit ministered to our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. There is a relationship within the very essence of God's character. This is a great mystery, but within God's nature there is fellowship.

Now folks, this is the only way psychologically we can understand God being the God of love. You cannot conceive of love philosophically or psychologically in terms

of an abstraction, or in terms of an energy or force of love in the universe, or as God as a great energizing love or truth. Love can only be understood interpersonally, relationally, in fellowship terms, and so what we see in the mystery of the Godhead is that within God's very character there is love, there is relationship. I will give you a little more heavy theology, and that out of that love God created the earth and this is how we see Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit involved in the very creation of the earth. As Paul puts it in Colossians very clearly, "In Jesus Christ all things were made." In other words, in God's decision to love--that's Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and the Father--in that oneness and in that fellowship, out of that fellowship God creates the earth. God sustains the earth. God redeems the earth when in our freedom we go corrosive and God fulfills the earth. That is the Second Coming of our Lord. There you have the Holy Spirit theology in its mystery terms. There is within God's very nature, love and fellowship. This means then that the Holy Spirit is not an energy or extension of your spirit or a spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit is a person as is Jesus Christ, as is God the Father. The Holy Spirit is the very personhood of God himself.

Now what are the two implications of this that we want to think about today as we go to the Lord's Supper? First, it means that when we speak of Christian faith, and when a Christian's faith speaks of God we mean the God who can be known, the God who can make himself known. We mean by God not a great force in the Universe that you reckon with or somehow put into a little box or somehow put into a container, but the God who, as he said to Moses in the beginning: "I am who I am. I will be who I will be." The God of persons. That's exciting.

Second, it means that this Lord's Supper which we now share together, which Jesus gave to his disciples to be shared together throughout all time--"until I come." This Lord's Supper is not simply an act of our worship, and in this regard we cannot go on believing that the Lord's Supper is merely a memorial feast. No, we go with Calvin and Luther, and now it is wonderful to see that the Eucharistic Congress of the Roman Catholic church has decided to accept Calvin's phrase, "this real presence of Christ." This is a tremendous breakthrough in ecumenical dialogue. No, in the Lord's Supper it is not simply an act of our worship. It is not simply our piety. It is not simply our faith endeavoring to honor Christ, but men

and women, boys and girls, there is a mystery in the Lord's Supper. The mystery is that we can really know Jesus Christ's love in our own lives, and these elements of bread and wine are to be signs and seals (that's the way our creed puts it in the Westminster Catechism) of the real presence of Christ that in a mysterious way he is here; in a mysterious way he makes himself known to you personally, individually, so that as you by faith begin to venture and to wager on the Jesus Christ you meet in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit confirms Jesus Christ to you so that you are able to say finally "Jesus is my Lord. I trust his love." The Holy Spirit did it by the real presence of Christ. Jesus Christ our Lord God the Father, God the Holy Spirit, can be known in your own heart, and this Lord's Supper with these elements of bread and wine acknowledge that real person. Now let me invite you to share in the Lord's Supper. Amen.



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II

UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY SPIRIT

"THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Second in a series of sermons preached at  
First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley  
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Last week we considered the mystery of the Holy Spirit. We began to try to unfold and understand the nature of our triune God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We considered the fact that within God's very character there is fellowship. There is love within God's very essence, and the moment we say that we have been ushered into the mystery of God who has fellowship within his own essence. We are ushered into the mystery of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe in one God--the Father, Creator, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, who has spoken for himself in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, and who still makes that Speech known to us today through the Holy Spirit.

Now for the next weeks I want us to consider together the nature of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. If you will notice in Article 3 of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting," all of Article 3 has to do with what God does for us. Article 2, "I believe in God the Son" has to do with what God has done in his own self for us in Jesus Christ--the objective fact of what God has done himself, and his act in history. Article 3 has to do with the subjective and objective results of that fact of what God has done in Christ, and the result of it in our lives. He creates the holy catholic church. He forgives us our sins. In the communion of saints he gives us the unity we have with one another, historically and also throughout in the mystery of the communion of saints through all times. And then with the resurrection of the body, the Creed is talking about the resurrection of your body and in the life everlasting the Creed is talking about your life everlasting. So this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

In the Bible, it seems to me if we are going to try to understand the parts of that ministry, we might put it this way. The biblical witness portrays to us that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to assure us, to equip us and to unite us. We have already seen those. We saw them in the third article of the Creed. The Holy Spirit binds us together in truth, and then sets us free. During these next weeks I want to consider these ministries of the Holy Spirit.

Today I want us to look at the primary ministry of the Holy Spirit, that is the ministry of assuring us of the reality and authority and love of God in Jesus Christ. John Calvin put it this way, "The whole of it comes to this. The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ binds us to himself. The Holy Spirit is the One who assures us of Jesus Christ. He assures us of God's mighty act in history."

So I put it this way. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to assure us each personally in our everyday lives of the reality (by that I mean the fact that God is, and that he is alive, that he is not just an abstract or theoretical fact of history) of God. Now that is a great burden off your shoulders when you are trying to bear witness to someone else about your faith. Our task is not to try to assure someone else of God's existence or of God's reality, that is the ministry of God Himself. He must authenticate Himself. That is what I mean when I say, "The Holy Spirit's ministry is to assure us of God's own reality." You simply cannot do it. There are no sets of proofs. Even though so great a theologian as St. Thomas Aquinas tried to prove the existence of God, it is impossible to prove. He must prove his own existence. We get all kinds of hints, clues and markers in history that, if we only look at them we will see that God exists, but it is God's task to assure you of his own existence. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to assure us of the authority of God in Jesus Christ. That is to say, to assure us in our own hearts that Jesus Christ actually reigns, that he not only lives and is, but that he deserves to reign in our lives.

Thirdly, and maybe most important as far as our own individual journeys are concerned, it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to assure us that Jesus Christ loves us. It is the Holy Spirit who makes

that connection in my heart so I can discover that Christ's love is not just a great sentiment in history, or a great fact of history, but is my fact. It is for me. He loves me.

Karl Barth put it this way in his little book, Dogmatics in Outline, when he was endeavoring to define the ministry of the Holy Spirit. "When men and women belong to Jesus Christ in such a way that they have the freedom to recognize that Christ's word is addressed also to them, his work is done also for them, and the message about him is also their task." Now what is he saying there? When the moment comes in your life when you are able to see that the work Christ did was not just a great fact out there, a general truth which I admire perhaps at a distance, or go to the museum once a week to look at (wouldn't it be tragic if that were your view of the church--a great museum where relics were held up once a week for you to look at?), but Karl Barth says the point where you see the work that Christ did as done for you; His death on the Cross; His resurrection from death, so that it is now an existential truth and not just an historical truth--that's the authority line when I realize that he deserves to reign and I decide to accept that reign. "When I decide that his message (now here Barth is talking about the mission that the Christian accepts) to go into all the world and share that love, is my mission and not just the mission for someone else, it happens indeed as your own human experience and action." In other words, it happens because you had faith. "It was not simply because of your faith, determination or exertion, it happens solely on the basis of the free gift of God in which all this is given. That gift and that giving is the Holy Spirit--God the Holy Spirit."

In other words, when God makes the reality you see his own reality; the reign his authority; the love his love, then Jesus Christ is not just a fact of history, but he is a personal, living relationship. When Jesus Christ is your Lord, and you are able to say that he is not only the Lord, but MY Lord, that is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Now let us reflect on how that happens, and what God does to bring it about--the ministry of the Holy Spirit--to bring us to that place. Many of you are at that place right now. The Holy Spirit has brought these pieces together, and you believe in Jesus Christ, and you bet your life on it. And then there are many

others who are on a journey where this is not yet quite the case. Maybe a great respect or even reverence for Christ, maybe a tremendous fascination with the figure of Jesus of Nazareth--yet somehow there is still a distance to go between that point where you see Jesus Christ, hear about him, learn about him, and have yet to embrace him and believe him and know him personally. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit that brings that interest and wistfulness and yearning together with God's Reality itself--Himself.

Let me read our text for today. It comes from the 15th chapter of Acts, beginning with the sixth verse. This is the incredible first ecumenical council when Peter and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem to defend the right of Greeks to become Christians, because Greeks had become Christians. And then a great issue arose--do they also have to become Jews? Do they have to go the whole heritage of Israel in order to become Christians, or can they become Christians directly and come to know Christ directly? Paul and Barnabas come up to Jerusalem to make their case. Peter, the head of the church, gives a great statement that justifies the fact that God can cause Greeks to become Christians. In that statement notice the ministry of the Holy Spirit as Peter tells how God did it all.

"The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider the matter. [In other words, considering whether Greeks could really become Christians without also becoming Jews.] And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you [God makes the decision], that by my voice the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. [Remember Cornelius? It was through Peter himself that the Gentiles first began to believe. Perhaps he is also bearing witness to the Day of Pentecost when probably Greeks also became Christians.] And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.'"

That is a very important theological sentence. "God who knows your heart bore witness to them." See? We did not do it. We preached the gospel. We just told the message, but God who knows the heart of each person assured them. He bore witness to them but the Holy Spirit cause them to

become Christians. That is what Peter is getting at. "And he made no distinction between us and them [Peter has to face the fact of what God did], but he cleansed their hearts by faith."

You see how all the things are together that Barth had mentioned? It happened by their faith, it is not automatic. We do not become Christians by osmosis. We do not become Christians because God just does it as though we have no choice in the matter. No, you have faith, but God who knows the hearts of men, Peter says, made the decision. He assured their hearts and they became Christians.

Then he goes on with this marvelous next conclusion that Peter makes. (vs. 10) "Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" In other words, why put the law on them which even we as Jews have not done a very good job with, and why do we test God? He can assure those Greeks any way He wants to assure them. "But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus, just as they will." Well, that is amazing.

Notice the 12th verse, "And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles." There you have the theology of the Holy Spirit right from the mouth of the Apostle Peter in the Book of Acts.

God, who knows the hearts of men and women, was able to assure them. He was able to bear witness to them so that they became Christians. And you know, men and women, that is still happening today. It is happening with you when you become a Christian. Here is how it works. You see the witness to Jesus Christ in the Bible and among friends, through the church, through history. You finally discover enough about Jesus that on the basis of what you have heard about Him you believe He is trustworthy. You decide to venture in faith. But it is the Holy Spirit that has been carrying you along in this, and when you make that venture of faith, the Holy Spirit confirms it and assures you in terms you can understand. This is the uniqueness of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in every person's life.

By the way, the Holy Spirit ministers in all kinds of ways with each of us, but the Holy Spirit assures our hearts so we can understand the reality, the authority and the love of Christ for us. That's the fulness of the Holy

Spirit. Now this assurance is both a salty experience, because the Holy Spirit convicts me of my sins, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit assures me of the authority and the reality of the love of Christ. In other words, the Holy Spirit convinces me of my need for the grace of Jesus Christ. Now we can understand what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant in his letter to his friend Bethge in Letters and Papers from Prison when he says, "We cannot hear the last word until we have heard the next to the last. The last word, which is the love of God, does not make sense to you until you have heard the next to the last word which is the judgment of God." Or to put it another way, "You cannot make sense out of God's love for you and his grace in forgiving you until you have heard the next to the last word which shows you that you need that love and need that grace and need that authority in your life."

So there is a side of the ministry of the Holy Spirit which causes pain in our hearts. And yet it is a good pain because it is a pain like the Great Physician who is now revealing the disease so that it may be healed. As we discovered in Acts in chapter 2, after Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, the people were cut to the heart. The people who heard Peter preach turned to him and said, "What must we do to be saved?" They were cut to the heart, and that is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It sounds so painful, and it really is painful. It is painful to be revealed. It is painful to have everything out in the open before God and sometimes even before our brothers and sisters. Often the Holy Spirit does this salty part in front of everyone around us, our children, our wives, our husbands, those that know us best discover that we are undone and that we are not the great, tall power of strength that we were. Suddenly we have need, overwhelming need, that only God Himself can fulfill.

This is a great experience in life. It is one of the greatest experiences of life. I feel sorry for anyone who has not gone through this experience. The next to the last word before I can hear the last word is the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

It is what we hear in the Book of Revelation when the Spirit, speaking to the churches, says to the Church of Laodicea, "Why, you are not hot. You are not cold. You are lukewarm. I will spit you out of my mouth. Now behold, I stand at the door

and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and sup with him. ...Those whom I love, I reprove." That's the salty ministry of the Holy Spirit, showing that little church at Laodicea that they are lukewarm, revealing them, showing them who they are. They had overwhelming need even though they said they were rich. They said they were beautifully clothed and had no needs, yet the Spirit said to them, "You have overwhelming need."

The great reformers called this, "The ministry of the conviction of sin." When Charles Finney had his great revivals in America, he had what he called a "conviction corner" in every church. We don't even have corners in this church, so it would be hard to do! He also had what they called the "sinner's seat" and people who were under conviction sat in that corner in front of everybody. Imagine the courage it would take to walk down and sit there. I don't think you sat there because others put you there. I believe you had to make the choice. But that is the way Finney revivals were, and the persons who sat in "conviction corner" and sat in the "sinner's seat," were feeling the conviction of the Holy Spirit, feeling guilt and they wanted resolution. We don't have sinner's seats now, and I'm not sure I am in favor of that kind of thing--the church presuming that it knows who is under conviction--but I do believe that it is a healthy experience to have the Holy Spirit reveal me. Show me that I cannot save myself. That is good news. That is the beginning of the good news. It is not the only news. If it were all the good news, just that I cannot help myself, it would be bad news.

Now the second half of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is assurance. The assurance of the Holy Spirit is also joyous. It is tremendously and wonderfully exciting when we men and women move across the line between our knowledge of facts about Jesus, having heard the word of witness to Christ, and become assured that it is not just a fact, but a personal experience. When I not only feel convicted of my sins, but feel assured of the love of Christ for me it is a joyous experience. Now we know what the Bible means when it says "And your sorrow shall be changed to joy." What is it that will turn sorrow to joy? It is the discovery of God's love in the midst of crisis, in the midst of tragedy, even the tragedy of my own sinfulness.

You know, one of the best bits of theology in all hymnology is the little song children sing, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." In other words, I dis-

cover the love of Christ in the Bible, but the little song also says the witness of Jesus Christ in the history of the Bible is what gives me the underpinning, but the Holy Spirit makes me know it. I KNOW it! And when you know that Jesus Christ loves you, that's the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life.

I want to tell you about another book by C.S. Lewis. I have been taking you through The Chronicles of Narnia bit by bit on Sunday mornings, and now I want to take you into another book in the same series that I have yet to introduce to you. This series of 7 volumes of children's stories portrays C.S. Lewis' own world view. His understanding of Reality. His understanding of life. There is profound theological content in "the Chronicles."

Today I want to tell you briefly about one of Lewis' best. They are all good, but this is my son's favorite. It is Book 5, The Horse and His Boy. It is the story about a little boy named Shasta, who finds a talking horse eventually named Bree (in Narnia animals talk). This little boy is an orphan who somehow landed on the shore one day. A ship had sunk and this boy, a little bit like Moses, lands on the shore and a stern fisherman takes him under tow and raises him with a very stern hand. He is not exactly mean, but he is very severe. He lives in an evil country, Tashbaan, and one day the boy hears a hint that the fisherman is actually going to sell him as a slave to one of the evil princes in that country, so Shasta decides to run away. He finds the horse of a rich man tied out back, discovers the horse can miraculously talk, and runs away with it. Shasta helps rescue a little princess who was also to be sold into slavery, and they go on a great mission. They go to warn Narnia that the evil country, Tashbaan, is going to attack. Shasta barely makes it to Narnia with his horse. He has harrowing experiences along the way. Finally he gets to Narnia and warns the king of the impending attack. He saves the whole city and so succeeds in his mission.

As those of you who have read The Chronicles of Narnia know, one of the highpoints in each book is when the various characters meet Aslan, the Christ figure. He is the "son of the Emperor from Beyond the Sea." He is the great lion, and he represents Christ. I want to read the scene from The Horse and His Boy when it dawns on Shasta who Aslan is. It is toward the book's end.

He is very discouraged and has not eaten for a long time. He is on a very dangerous mountain-pass in Narnia walking with Bree at night. There is a huge precipice on one side. As he is walking along he suddenly becomes aware that some huge figure (it is very dark so he cannot see what it is) is on the side between them and the great cliff. He can even feel its breath, and of course he is getting more and more uneasy about this great creature along side him, until finally he can stand it no more. He bites his lip in terror. He wants to cry out, but he is afraid to because that will draw attention in case the creature is not aware of his existence yet. Finally he can bear it no longer. From this point I will read C.S. Lewis:

"'Who are you?' he said, scarcely above a whisper. 'One who has waited long for you to speak,' said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep. 'Are you a giant?' asked Shasta. 'You might call me a giant,' said the Large Voice, 'But I am not like the creatures you call giants.' 'I can't see you at all,' said Shasta, after staring very hard. Then (for an even more terrible idea had come into his head) he said, almost in a scream, 'You're not something dead, are you? Oh please--please do go away. What harm have I ever done to you? Oh, I am the unluckiest person in the whole world.'

[Throughout his journey he had thought that he was the unluckiest person in the world.] "Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face." By the way, in the Bible the Holy Spirit is portrayed as a wind of God. The word Spirit is literally the word for the wind. Shasta feels its breath. "'There,' it said, 'that is not the breath of a ghost. Tell me your sorrows.' Shasta was a little bit reassured by the breath: so he told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all their dangers in Tashbaan and about his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded Aravis. [That was a girl who was wounded in the back by a lion.] And also, how very long it was since he had had anything to eat. 'I do not call you unfortunate,' said the Large Voice. 'Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?' said Shasta. 'There was only one lion,' said the Voice. 'What on earth do you mean? I just told you that there were at least two the first

night and---' 'There was only one; but he was swift of foot.' 'How do you know?' 'I was the lion.' And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. [Now this is a tremendously significant paragraph from Lewis.] 'I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat [a kitty cat which came up to Shasta when he was sleeping in the tombs at night and comforted him when he was terribly afraid] who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time.' [When they were very tired, a great lion appeared and scared the horses practically to death, and that is how they made the final spurt of energy to get to Narnia in time.] 'And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you.'

'Then it was you who wounded Aravis.' 'It was I.' 'But what for?' 'Child,' said the Voice, 'I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own.' 'Who are you?' asked Shasta. 'Myself,' said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook; and again 'Myself,' loud and clear and gay; and then the third time 'Myself,' whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it."

Do you see what happens to Shasta? Out of the grace and love of Aslan he has revealed himself to Shasta. All along through his life he ministered to this boy. He ministered to him in a salty way when they were scared and ran for their lives. The scratch on Aravis' back, Shasta cannot understand, it is something she has to figure out. Aslan has to show that to her. You know, you never get to know about other people's sins when you are a Christian. You only get to know clearly about your own sins. That's wonderful. So the experience of fear, the experience of joy, the experience of life, all converge together. All the ministry of Aslan, all the ministry of the Holy Spirit--the Holy Breath of God as he draws together the strands of our lives and assures us of who he is--is still going on today. Amen.



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III

UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY SPIRIT

"GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Third in a series of six sermons preached  
at First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley  
Ephesians 4:1-16 May 4, 1975

What are the ministries of the Holy Spirit? The first week we considered the person of the Holy Spirit, and now the work of the Holy Spirit. Last week I shared with you that the first and primary ministry of the Holy Spirit is the ministry of assurance. The Holy Spirit of God, God by His Spirit, assures us we are his. That's the way Paul puts it in Romans 8, "the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." The Holy Spirit is the One who assures us in terms that we can understand of the existence of God.

Now look at the implications of that. That means that it is not your job nor my job to assure people that God exists. This takes all that off your shoulders. If you see yourself seriously as a Christian witness in the world, one thing you do not have to do is prove the existence of God. You cannot do it whether you try to do it philosophically, intellectually or any other way. God must prove his own existence. God must authenticate his own character--and he does. He does it very well, and that is the first ministry of the Holy Spirit--to assure you of his existence, to assure you of his authority, and to assure you of his love. He assures you of the authority and the Lordship of Christ, his claim upon your life. You and I bear witness to the existence, authority and love of Christ, but it is the Holy Spirit that makes the connection in our lives so that when we take the witness of the Holy Scriptures, the witness of the church, of brothers and sisters, and finally the pieces come together, we say, "Ah! yes! Jesus Christ is my Lord. I trust him." It is the Holy Spirit who made that connection and assured you.

Now today I want us to move on to a second ministry of the Holy Spirit. According to the New Testament, the Holy Spirit equips you with gifts that enable you to be Christ's disciple in the real world. The Holy Spirit has the ministry of sanctification. In theological language that is the ministry of edification or equipping. It is the Holy Spirit who is to equip us so that we can, in fact, be disciples of Jesus Christ in the real world.

Remember in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's great novel, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, in that final scene which I have often made reference to where Alyosha bears witness to his faith to Ivan, the atheist. Ivan criticizes Alyosha because it does not seem like his prayers are working in getting him out of prison any earlier. He says, "You Christians are in prison for the same prison term as anybody else in this prison camp." Here Solzhenitsyn has a chance to share a profound discovery he has made--probably the discovery that made him a Christian. Solzhenitsyn puts this great answer to Ivan into the mouth of Alyosha. "I don't pray for that. I pray that I may do the will of God. I pray I may obey God here and now." In other words Alyosha says I pray for the strength that God can give me to make it here and now in this prison camp on a 24-hour basis. And that is all I pray about right now. That keeps me plenty busy in my prayers. That is the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

When Solzhenitsyn, in The Gulag Archipelago, saw Christians able to survive with meaning in a rough and difficult spot, and when he saw that the Gospel of Jesus Christ not only made sense to these people but they were given the strength to endure, and they were equipped with gifts that enabled them to have a ministry in the midst of that situation, maybe those were some of the things that caused the convergence to occur so that Alexander Solzhenitsyn himself could become a public believer. Really, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is the testament of that journey.

Let's talk about the ministry of enabling. I have a great text in the book of Ephesians. There are several great texts in the New Testament on the Holy Spirit, and this is one of them. Let's listen as Paul talks to us: "I therefore a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all

lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Like so many places where Paul gives advice or an exhortation or encouragement, he is doing that to the Ephesians. A little bit like Alyosha saying, "I pray that I may do the will of God here in this prison camp." Paul now says, "I hope you will do the will of God where you live."

Now Paul decides to talk about how God will enable you to do it. It is one thing to be challenged--what a challenge Paul give here! He says, "I am a prisoner for the Lord. I am writing from a prison camp, and I urge you to lead a life worthy of the calling you have been given." He is asking an awful lot there. Lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, the bond of peace. Well now, how in the world are you going to have the strength to do it?

That is what now dominates the rest of Paul's fourth chapter. He starts out by talking about who the Holy Spirit is, God's own character, He is going to help you do it. Paul starts out by saying, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." Here Paul introduces the doctrine of the gifts which we are going to talk about today. The Holy Spirit gives gifts.

Let me tell you about the two words that are used here in the Greek language for gifts. The first word appears when he says, "but grace was given to you." Grace is the Greek word *charis*. *Charis* comes from a root word *cara*, which is also the Greek word for joy. *Charis* in the Greek language really only means surprising gift. The Apostle Paul is the one who gets credit for taking hold of this Greek word and capturing it for the Christian gospel. He takes the word and makes it a completely Christian word. He uses that word to describe God's gift so that now instead of just being a gift, it becomes the great gift that God gives; the gift of his love, his amazing, surprising love. Now when it becomes in the long form *charismata* (where we get the word *charismatic*) it is translated gift in many places in the New Testament. For instance when I Corinthians 12 or Romans 12 talk about the gifts we have, it is the word *charismata*. Now the other word that is used for gift, which is here translated in verse 7, "But

grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." There the word gift is not *charismata* but simply the verb form of to give, the other common word used for gift. It is a verb turned into a noun, but once again it shows the high sense of energy and activity of God, the Giver who gives gifts. And then Paul takes that word "to give" and turns it into a noun, so those are the two words used all through the New Testament for gift.

And then Paul decides to give a little discussion of who Christ is and what he has done for us. "Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.' (In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)" In other words Paul reminds us that the Christ who gives us gifts is the Christ who died for us--is the Christ who went through the Cross and the Resurrection for us. That means our gifts from Christ are costly gifts.

Then he speaks very specifically, "'And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry.'" There is no comma there in the original Greek, and the RSV is incorrect to put a comma there. It should simply say "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry." You are the saints, and the purpose of the gift is to equip you so that you can do your ministry; "for building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro, carried with every wind of doctrine [By the way, the word "wind" here is Spirit also; the Greek word for wind and the word translated Spirit are the same word], by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [Isn't it interesting? Every place Paul talks about gifts, he always talks about the body--I Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. Always the

same order, the gifts that are given to you, then the body that is created with the gifts], joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love."

The whole rest of Ephesians goes on to spell out the implications of all this. Let's observe what the text teaches. 1) The text teaches that there is one Lord. You will notice the play on the word "one"--one Lord, one baptism, one God, one Father of us all. This interest in the word one is to show us that the Holy Spirit, when he gives gifts, is not meant to scatter the church or the gifted people into many directions. Whenever that happens, and ironically it did happen in the first century church, it is a sad thing. The most problematic churches in the first century were the most gifted churches. It is the church at Corinth that has so many gifts that causes the most trouble. Paul is reminding those Christians that the Holy Spirit does not cause the gifts to scatter her and to have everyone off doing his own thing with the gifts he has. The gifts are given by the one Lord, and they are bound to the one Lord. The gifts in no way determine your worth, and this is a very important teaching in this passage as well as in all the other passages on gifts in Paul's teaching and in our Lord's teaching as well. The gifts do not determine your worth.

Remember in First Corinthians, chapter 12, Paul says, "The ear cannot say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body." What Paul makes clear there is that the gifts you have in no way determine your worth before God. Your worth before God is solely dependent upon God's love--not your gifts. Your gifts have to do with your tasks. Your gifts are not to be confused with your worth. Your worth is dependent upon God's decision by which he saved you, by which he loved you, and that is made clear throughout this text. The gifts are to draw us all together and to knit us together in love. They are not to divide us, or to make one person feel superior to another person. No, our worth is dependent upon God's decision, and the gifts have to do with the tasks that he decides to give us.

2) The Lord gives unique gifts to each person, and the uniqueness factor of every person is preserved in this text. Over and over again he says, "some prophets, some evangelists, some teachers," not that everyone is the same. Each person is uniquely equipped. This is a very important teaching throughout the New

Testament, and yet the third observation from the text is also equally clear. 3) Although the Lord gives unique gifts to each individual, he still gives the gifts for the good of the whole body, and through the body to the world.

Notice, the gifts are given for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry. What is the work of ministry? Ministry is where the tire touches the road. Ministry is where our lives touch the neighborhood we live in, and touch the world I am a part of. So the gifts are given for the good of the body, and through the body for the good of the world. In fact, in Romans 12 Paul has this most eloquent teaching on gifts. Paul, in that teaching, follows the ministry of gifts immediately with the strategy of the whole church for the world. Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 of Romans all have to do with the obligation of Christians in the world. As soon as they get their gifts, they are sent into the world.

Now following those observations, let us make three practical reflections about this text for us today. The first reflection I would like to make is this. It seems to me on the basis of the New Testament text on the gifts of the Holy Spirit it is best not to artificially hedge in the gifts that God gives us by the concept of one gift per person. And believe it or not, that is taught in some circles, that God only intends each of us to have one gift. There is no sound biblical footing for that kind of hypothesis. It is best not to hedge in the gifts that God gives us, because the whole teaching of gifts is centered upon the fact that God makes the decisions as to where the gifts are given. Also, it is best not to hedge the gifts by old cultural expectations. I spent a whole morning back in January discussing where the gifts are hedged on the basis of cultural expectations, sexual expectations or political expectations. No, God gives the gifts by his decision.

It is best not to hedge gifts in by the assumption that the gifts mentioned in the New Testament are all the gifts there are. No, in this text we only have a few mentioned, but there is another list in Romans and another list in First Corinthians. I think it would be a contrived kind of biblical interpretation to say that all the gifts are mentioned there. To use that logic you would have to say the same thing of Paul's

lists on sin, and assume that when Paul listed sins in Romans 1 that there were all the sins there are. No, we are much more creative than that about sin, and we would be foolish to assume that all the sins have been listed when Paul makes a list of sins.

The same thing with gifts. Gifts are meant to be illustrative of what God wants to give you. Another observation about hedging in the gifts is that I don't think it is healthy to try to draw up elaborate distinctions between gifts and talents. Many people get into this trap wondering whether my talent as a surgeon, or my talent as a lawyer, or my talent as a bricklayer, or my talent as a psychologist or teacher, or tutor; or my gifts, like the spiritual gift of healing, or encouragement, or zeal, or faith, are of equal worth. I don't see the basis for drawing elaborate distinctions in the New Testament teachings. It seems to me rather that it is better to see one great whole. God gives us spiritual gifts and talents and he holds us responsible for all these things. They are all given to be under the stewardship of his reign. That is the New Testament teaching. It seems to me it is best not to get into elaborate sub-distinctions on the difference between gifts and talents.

Now let me make one more observation. It seems to me it is unwise to hedge in the gifts of the Holy Spirit by the assumption that some gifts are given in one age and are not for another age. There is a whole teaching in the church that maintains that speaking in tongues, which was given in the first century, was only for the first century and is inappropriate in our century. Speaking in tongues has been a great issue in the church in the last century. It seems to me, according to the New Testament witness, the stand we should take on that score is this: speaking in tongues in the New Testament is seen as an assurance gift, a gift to assure you of Jesus Christ--his existence, his authority and his love. This gift should be neither scolded or glorified. It seems to me that non-charismatics (which would represent mostly our own tradition here), have often erred on the side of scolding the gift of speaking in tongues; or, perhaps another position, glorifying the gift. It seems to me both positions are in error, but rather we should take the position of the Apostle Paul, that the gift of assurance should be neither scolded nor glorified.

Now let me make another practical observation about the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament the gifts of the Holy Spirit are

given to us to assure us of the reality, the authority, and the love of Christ. Therefore, the results that those gifts have in our lives are what is important. We are held responsible, as I said a moment ago, for what God gives us. That is the New Testament logic. Notice the way this chapter 4 begins: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling." Now you could add another word for calling, and it would be in perfect keeping with that passage because they go together in the New Testament logic. "I beg you to lead a life in keeping with your gifts that I have given you."

What God calls you to do, he always gives you strength to do, so we are called to be responsible for what God gives us. Now what does he give us in the gifts? Assurance of his own existence, of his own authority, of his own love. Now that is spiritual power, men and women. According to the New Testament, spiritual power is never seen as an energy that flows through you, but always as your assurance that God has the power, that Jesus Christ reigns, and that is real spiritual power. You cannot develop any ego trip on that kind of power, but you can often develop an ego trip on a view of power if you see spiritual power as a sort of energy that I have and am able to use better than somebody else can use it. But in the New Testament spiritual authority and power is always your assurance that Jesus Christ has the power--not that I have the power. He has the power, and then he equips and gives energy to me; and to Alyosha in the 24-hour cycle where he lives. Jesus equips me with gifts so that I can be his disciple.

Therefore, the result of my gift should be that it sets me free to live my life to the glory of God and to the good of the world. Now as I see it, the result of this is that my basic outlook as a Christian toward the world is not defensive or isolated, nor that my gift sends me off in a little world all of my own, but my outlook should be caring and hopeful. Hopeful because I believe I discovered from God's gift how good he is, how strong he is and that he exists. Therefore I am hopeful that that gift and that love, set loose in the world, can change human lives. I am caring because I have received God's love and want to share it.

Now let me be practical with you. I am talking to myself, and I am talking to you as brothers and sisters right now. I think now we as Christians have concrete chances to make our stand clear on how wonderful God's gifts are for us and we can do it in concrete ways. I don't know about you, but this last week has been a very hard week for me. I have been under great distress as I have listened to my own country, and the debate that is going on about refugees coming from Vietnam. To hear CBS in its editorial, to hear high officials in our own government, in our own state, decry the impact of refugees upon our economy, and how they are going to take jobs away from us, and, of course, decrying the fact that it is not the right time for those refugees to come. We are suffering from unemployment. We have all kinds of hassles and problems of our own. Maybe Russia should take them. Somebody else should take them. It is certainly no time for us to take them. One senator said that just yesterday. He said Russia should take them, this is not time for us. We have bad economic problems. What are these thousands and thousands of refugees doing bothering us right now? I am very distressed, and in the bicentennial year of our country, a country founded by refugees.

Listen folks, there is never a good time to help anybody. You tell me a good time. You tell me when it is right, when you have enough money, enough in the larder, enough saved, that you can really help anyone. You tell me. The first Thanksgiving our Pilgrim fathers and mothers celebrated. Was that the right time to share their bounty with their neighbors and draw everybody in for a big feast? They did it in the fall. That's no time to have a Thanksgiving. They have winter in front of them. The winter before they had practically died! Well then, do you have Thanksgiving in the spring? That's when you are sure you have got through the winter, but there's not much food left in the spring. You have to save some to plant. Well, should you have it in the middle of the summer? You can't do it then because you don't know how the crops are going to turn out. You might not have enough for the fall. Or shall you have it in the fall? No, because winter is coming. Can you have it in the middle of the winter? Well it is pretty hard then... Will you tell me when you can share? When do you have enough to share?

Do you know something? I believe right now we as Christians have a chance to put our money where our mouth is. We as Christians have a chance to stand up. I am asking our Session this week to really think through what we as a congregation can do for refugees. I can

remember as an undergraduate here at Cal, just as I was becoming a Christian, I came to this old sanctuary. I remember a family from Latvia that was sponsored by First Presbyterian Church. I remember they had a tiny baby they brought with them, and I know that baby today. She is a beautiful woman some 28 years old, a great asset and Christian person in this church. But I am telling you, now is the time we have a chance to live out the gifts God has given us, and believe me, God holds us accountable.

Also, as we dare to live out the gifts he gives us, we will discover that we cannot outgive God. The only way you discover this is by action. I think that we Christians have a marvelous time right now to find ways politically, personally, individually, to let a whole new world view break in upon our American culture. I believe you students at the university have a chance to share what it means to be gifted from the Lord. I know from talking with young Teaching Fellows that among science classes many students are so concerned about getting into medical school, so concerned about letting anyone else get ahead of them in scientific experiments, that they are not helping one another. If a student should be sick and miss a class, other students do not want to instinctively help that person find out what was happening in class the day before because it might affect the curve and they might not get into medical school if that student comes up.

I was talking to one of our young Teaching Fellows in chemistry here and he said, "You know, it is amazing to see a Christian who is able to operate from a different world view, able to help a student who did miss an experiment due to sickness. He can do this because his whole life is not so geared around getting himself ahead. We can share a gift God gives because we see that the gifts God gives us are meant to give us confidence that Jesus Christ exists; that he reigns; and that He loves. That's the meaning of the gift.

We are living in a time when you do not have to do spectacular things to win people to Christ. I think we can do simple things, ordinary sharing in our neighborhoods, in the Cub Scouts, and in the PTA and in the places where we live, where we can share something of ourselves and something of the goodness that God has given us, and it has a spreading effect and God will honor it. I believe this is what Paul has

called us accountable for on the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Remember I warned you two weeks ago that when we started this series on the Holy Spirit that the Holy Spirit would start meddling in our lives. The Holy Spirit has come swooping in on your life and is going to meddle. That is the way Paul starts the fourth chapter. "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of what God has given you." Ah! but isn't it beautiful that the promise is there, God will give you what you need, so you can give it and share it. That is the age in which we live.

Well, I have to stop. Next week I want to talk about the surprise in this gift teaching. I will just share it now, and we will talk about it next week. We in Western culture tend to think of giftedness as leading to less and less need of others. That's the way we operate. We are rugged individualists in Western culture, and we got this from the Greeks. Remember Plato's philosopher-king is the most gifted person in the republic, and he needs others the least. And from Plato onward we always glorify the person who gets to the top of the pyramid and needs everybody else the least of all. He is the great actor. He is the great scientist. He is the great doctor. He is the great lawyer. He does not need anyone else because he is so smart; or he is the great spiritual giant who gets so great that he does not need anybody else. Everybody else needs him or her, of course, but he does not need anyone. That is not difficult to see around us. Here is the surprise the New Testament teaches--you saw it in Ephesians. The more we grow, the more we become gifted by the Holy Spirit, the more we need the people around us, because the gift introduces us to the body. Next week we will talk on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in creating the holy catholic church. Amen.

Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, I have a great burden on my heart and I know many in this room share it. A burden for my country, a burden for the feelings and the sense of loss of purpose, of discouragement many people are feeling--a sense of how everything seems to be so fruitless after all those years in Southeast Asia. So many lives squandered, so many things wasted, even human lives, and now there is a

kind of retrenching and a falling back, a fear and even a growing selfishness in isolation, hoping that we can just do our own thing and everybody else will go away and not bother us any more.

Lord, I pray that we Christians might set the pace for a whole new way of looking at life--to set the pace of being peace-makers; those who help and care; who go the second mile; who are equipped by the Holy Spirit to live our lives in our communities and in this country in a way that will help to heal and to give hope in the face of despair and discouragement. So, Lord, I pray that you will bless us all in helping us to discover our gifts and then to share them with those around us.

In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.



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UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY SPIRIT

IV. "THE HOLY SPIRIT UNITES"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Fourth in a series of sermons preached at  
First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

Romans 12:3-8

May 11, 1975

During these weeks we are considering together the theology of the Holy Spirit, the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Our first week we considered the mystery of Holy Spirit theology, the fact that the Holy Spirit of God is not an energy or force, but is a Person. Then last week we considered a second great ministry of the Holy Spirit, what we call in theology the ministry of sanctification. The Holy Spirit not only redeems us and assures us of Christ, but enables us to live the Christian life, the discipleship to which Christ calls us, on a day to day basis. This is the ministry of enabling, or another way of putting it, the ministry of gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Now today I want us to consider a third ministry of the Holy Spirit and that is that the Holy Spirit creates the church. Listen to the Apostles' Creed, Article I - "I believe in God the Father." Article II - "I believe in God the Son." Article III - "I believe in God the Holy Spirit." Now listen to the words that follow that statement in the Creed, "I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting."

All those things mentioned in the third article have to do with us. They have to do with what God wants to do in our lives. The first thing he wants to do is create the church--"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church." Holy because he makes you holy; catholic means universal, world wide.

Remember the Psalm read this morning, Psalm 107, where it is predicted to David that God will draw a body together from the east, the north, the south and the west? He will draw all nations together into his family--the catholic church. Church is the Greek word ekklesia which literally means "gathering." The Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit creates

the church. And what a body it is too! It is different from any other in society. It is not a mutual interest group like the Rotary or Kiwanis, or one of the many animal organizations like the Moose, Elks or Lions. Those are all joined together because of mutual interests or mutual affinity, or even racial, national, political or economic affinity. The Christian church is an entirely different body.

As C. S. Lewis puts it in Screwtape Letters in the first or second chapter when he says that when the new Christian goes to church he sees there precisely all the people he has been avoiding all week long! (I am not sure that is true here!) But what is Lewis getting at? He is getting at the fact that when you go to church you do not see all the people who beautifully blend in with your mutual interests. No. You go to the Christian church and you see the people you have been avoiding. You see the people who are not like you. We are only here for one reason--Jesus Christ compels us to come. He draws us to himself, and as he draws us to himself, he draws us to each other: Whether we like it or not, and usually we do not like it. That's why Christian churches have so much strife and problems, because Christ calls us together in a body which really defies definition. It is not a social group. It is not like anything else you can name. The Christian church is a body drawn together because Christ calls us together. That is what the doctrine is teaching when it says the Holy Spirit creates the church. The Holy Spirit drew us together.

One of the reasons we wanted to design this building in a circle was so that we could be drawn together around the Lord's table because our Lord drew the church together. He called us into being. The Holy Spirit assures you of Christ in your heart, he gives you gifts and now his third ministry--he creates the holy catholic church.

I have a text for you which I think will show us this teaching and place it into a biblical context which will be helpful. In Romans 12 you will see Paul teach us this doctrine. This is the beginning of the last section of the book of Romans. In chapters 1 through 11 Paul has shown the incomparable meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ --God's radical breakthrough in human history. He also has taught faith and grace.

He calls us to believe in Christ, and he has given us great promises. He has even given us a little historical discussion in chapters 9, 10 and 11 on the meaning of Israel. In chapter 12 on to 16 Paul copes with a major question. In my view Paul tries to answer this question: Yes, it is wonderful to say that God has acted. It is wonderful to say that God has called us to faith; but now, Paul, what are the prospects of survival of the Christian gospel and the Christian church through to the end of the first century? They are living in a difficult time. Paul writes during the time of Nero. He knows the stresses that the church is under, and so he asks the question, "Will the church survive?" In chapters 12 through 16, in my view of the book, Paul is giving us a game plan for the survival of the Christian church. But more than survival, it is a game plan for the mission of the church, or a strategy, if you please, for the victory of the gospel. And in that strategy, Paul, at the very outset of this letter in the twelfth chapter, gives us an introduction to the church. He helps us to understand how the church, the body that Christ calls into being, that the Holy Spirit creates, is going to be a part of that strategy.

The twelfth chapter begins with a summary like so many great parts of Paul's letter to the Romans before it. Paul summarizes some of what he had been teaching up to that moment, and then moves on.

Chapter 12, verse 1: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, because of the grace of God [or "in view of the grace of God" which is his summary of all that he has been teaching so far] to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God [That means that God makes it holy and acceptable], which is your spiritual worship."

This opening in chapter 12 is intensely personal and individualistic. You cannot give somebody else's body to Christ. That is one thing you cannot do, and especially since it is called the living body. If it were dead bodies, you might say you could go out and kill a few people and bring them in. No, no. He says, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice"--this is an intensely personal sacrifice. Then he gives a challenge and a promise: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Literally the best translation of that passage is, "do not be squeezed in your own life by the agenda of the passing age of this world." In other words he calls on us to challenge the idols of our own times. He calls on us to challenge the agenda of the world as the agenda for our lives. Challenge those idols

and be transformed. You cannot do that for yourself, that is something God must do for you. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind. And then Paul makes a promise. In that transformation you will discover God's will, and you will discover that it is good, acceptable and perfect.

Now I want to talk about the third through the eighth verses. "For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him."

Verse three begins the same way that verse one of chapter 12 began: "In view of the grace of God; present your bodies; be transformed." Now he starts verse three the same way: "In view of the grace of God, the surprising gift of God's love, I urge every one of you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think." That is interesting because in verse 2 he said, God will transform you, and in a sense he asserted your great worth. Now he puts alongside of that a passage on humility and modesty. Paul loves to do this. He loves to put things in tension. On the one hand he glorifies you in chapter 12:1,2 and now he gives an argument or a defense of modesty. He says that because of the grace given to me I bid you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but have a sober evaluation of yourself." And he even says that this is a measure of faith. Look at the logic of the Apostle Paul; the more faith you have in the love of God, the more you will be able to be realistic about yourself. There will be no need for pretense or phoniness. No need to be anything you are not. You see what he is doing to the church? He is saying because of the love of God, as a matter of fact, the mark of your faith in the love of God, will be that you will be able to have a sober evaluation of yourself. You will be able to be realistic about who you are almost in proportion to how much you know about God's love.

He is saying that if you had a low view of God's love, then you would have to have a lot of pretense and self-flattery to keep yourself high, but if you had a high view of God's love, you would be able to be realistic about yourself and

you would need no false statements about how great you were. Do you see his point? That's the way it goes in chapter 12. Then he goes on and talks about the body. "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another." That is his theology of the church. Somehow this grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ makes us one in him; and in him, individually members one of another. That's the church. And then he introduces gifts.

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us [Here Paul makes the point that the gifts are given by God's grace. It is a loving God who gives you gifts that differ and yet the gifts are unique. Here once again he asserts the uniqueness factor for each of us. You see how he is working the themes of uniqueness and unity alongside each other?], let us use them; if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, [encourages] in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

Paul has done an interesting thing with all these gifts. He has refined each one. Take the last one where he says, if you give aid, do it with zeal. The reason he refines that is that in the biblical view of ethics, our aid to our neighbor is not out of obligation. In an historic frame of reference for the first century, if someone came to you with a need you would be obligated to minister to them. But our Lord ended that with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable it is not the man alongside the road crying out for help that is the ethical norm, but it is the Samaritan who reaches out to find human need and minister to it. Now Paul was following up with the same sort of ethical norm. He is saying, "when you give aid, I want you to give it with zeal." That means I want you to find human need and minister to it. I want you to find the people who have needs, not just to wait around and say, "Oh! I'm a wonderful person. I'll help anybody who asks for help." According to the New Testament ethic, that is not enough. The New Testament ethic is that you are living in a complex age where needs are so complicated that you and I had better find ways of finding out what the needs are, and then with zeal go in to minister to human needs where we find them.

I like the next one too, "He who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." Those of you who are in a helping profession know very well that often, ironically, the people who are in a helping service are the grouchiest, most pessimistic in their helping, people around. And Paul gives advice here. He says if you are a helper, if you are doing acts of mercy, one of the worst, most dehumanizing experiences of life is to have someone share an act of mercy with you and do it in an angry or resentful way. So, he says, if you do acts of mercy, do them with cheerfulness.

I want to make three main reflections on this passage we just read. The first I have already referred to. I want to come back to it now. I want you to notice the realism of grace. I want you to notice the way Paul introduces the church, and this is a great Pauline passage on the creation of the church. Listen to that great sentence again. "So we, though many, are one body in Christ." Paul's church doctrine is the body of Christ theology. We are one body in Christ, individually members one of another, and we have gifts." The body of Christ is called together, but notice the realistic footing on which the church was created. Only upon the foundation of God's certain love can we be simply who we really are, without pretense. And that is the Christian theology of the church.

Folks, I want to set you free from something that is a terror to church doctrine, and that is the idea that the Christian church is some marvelous group of semi-angels, cherubim and seraphim, and that we are so wonderful and so great that God calls us together in order to praise him. And naturally it will spill over on the world too, and then we have these marvelous worship services together of all these angels who are joined together at 2407 Dana Street in Berkeley.

If you view the church that way, you might pull it off for a little while if you are particularly easily deceived, and then after a while you would certainly see, as Daniel's great prophecy of the idols that Nebuchadnezzar had, the clay feet, and then the idol will fall. But thank God the New Testament never presents the church that way. The church is never idealized. It is not, as Bonhoeffer calls it, "the wish dream." It is not the wish dream of

a group of fanatics or of religious pietists, but in the New Testament the Christian church is made up of real people. It is made up of people who have sinned. It is made up of people who are drawn together by the grace of God, drawn together because Jesus Christ calls us together. People who need to be saved. People who are experiencing his salvation. We are the Christian church, and that's the ground on which Paul's teaching of the strategy of Romans 12 to 16 began. Think of it again. He says, "I bid you, in view of the grace of God, not to be anything you aren't, but with sober evaluation not to think too highly of yourself." That's the way he begins his teaching. That is his portrayal of the Christian church.

Now I want to make a second observation, and that is the observation we made last week that the gifts are given by God, the enablement is given to ordinary people like you and me. Let me put that another way. As weak as we are, as sinful as we are, God intends to equip us to be his people in the world. He is going to do his work through the Christian church. And just about the time you and I are ready to write off the Christian church, don't forget that this body has an amazing way of surviving. It has an amazing way of sticking in and holding on when everybody else goes out. It is because God gives gifts to the church. That is the only explanation. By the Holy Spirit he causes us to stick and to hold.

Now the third observation: Notice that the Lord of the gifts who enables us, individually, to make it, is the Lord who creates the church and pulls us together. He unites us with one another so that we find each other, and we need each other.

Now add all these together and we have the unifying ministry of the Holy Spirit. Think of this ministry in two ways: 1) It is the Holy Spirit who assures you and me personally of our individual and unique worth so that we feel that we really have worth. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us a genuinely good feeling about ourselves. Paul puts it this way, we do not get our agenda from the world. This passing age does not give us the agenda for the meaning of our lives. We get it by being transformed. The Greek word for transformed is metamorphosis. God himself transforms us, so that the Christian does not harbor unrealistic notions about who he is, but discovers his worth as a child of God. And it is the Holy Spirit who assures me that I am a child of God, as he assured me of Christ.

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That is what Paul says in Romans 8. It is the Holy Spirit who bears witness with my spirit that I am a child of God. He is the one who helps us say, "Abba, Father." That in Aramaic literally would be "Daddy." He enables us to say the affectionate word to God. He makes us feel good about ourselves. He makes us feel our worth individually, uniquely.

2) At the same time the Holy Spirit draws us into a real family of real people so that we don't trail off into independent isolation by ourselves. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is God's will that through this wonderful new family he creates the holy catholic church. It is his will that in this family we are to grow, and through this family we are to serve the world and to be his messengers in the whole world. This is his strategy.

After Paul has introduced the church, he goes on in chapters 12 through 16 to give a practical strategy for the Christian church to make it in the world, and to have a decisive effect on the age in which we live. That is the ministry of the Holy Spirit--to unite.

Heavenly Father, We thank you for what you do in our lives. How you draw us together, how you assure us of Jesus Christ and his love so that we can feel it in our bones and feel our own worth before you. And then Lord, how you not only assure us of Christ, but you enable us to be his disciples and then enable us to find our brothers and sisters to be drawn together into the "forever family," into the family which is being created by the Holy Spirit himself. Lord, we thank thee for this third ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Now help us as a church to be the kind of people you want us to be. Help us to do acts of mercy with cheerfulness, and to give aid with zeal. Help us to encourage. Help us to be a people who really serve the world. Help us to find ministries, and to encourage one another in ministries. Lord, we pray for the needs of our age. We think of the great societal needs --patients sitting in hospitals right now unable to have surgery because of disputes, and because of greed, really, that has caused so much problem in the insurance of doctors. Lord, we pray that thou wilt protect and help. Give us as Christians means of bearing an influence for good. Give us gifts so that we may serve in your name. In Jesus' name. Amen.



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V

UNDERSTANDING THE HOLY SPIRIT

"YE SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Fifth in a series of six sermons preached  
at First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

May 18, 1975

I John 4:1-4

During these last weeks we have been considering together the theology of the Holy Spirit, endeavoring to understand the ministry and the Person of the Holy Spirit. Today is Pentecost Sunday.

During these weeks we have been especially endeavoring to focus upon the ministries of the Holy Spirit. Now for the last two Sundays in this series, I want to consider the liberating and the binding ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit sets us free, and the Holy Spirit binds us to the truth. In the gospel of John, eighth chapter, our Lord Jesus Christ, in one of his famous interviews, says this, "If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Now when he said this he offended the people around him because they said, "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to any one."

Talk about rose-colored glasses' view of history--that is really it! The Jews, as a matter of fact, have never known anything else but bondage except for a very brief time during the reign of King David. And yet they said, "We have never been in bondage to any one. How is it you say, 'you will be made free?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.'"

It is interesting that Jesus does not go into a historical discussion concerning Israel's political bondage, but he talks about a far profounder bondage--the bondage of our own sins. Jesus says, "I say every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues in the house for ever. So if

the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed!"

It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to make us free, and to bind us to the Son--Jesus Christ. In an amazing way the Holy Spirit sets us free. But there is a paradox here. At the same time that we are set free, the Holy Spirit binds us to the Son--so that as we know and obey Jesus Christ, then we are free in the fullest sense of all. The New Testament logic is that as we obey Jesus Christ, we are at the same time obviously his slaves. We are his servants. But as we experience that servanthood, obeying Jesus Christ, according to the logic of the New Testament, we are in the fullest sense free. So all of the freedom language, the liberation language, of the New Testament has to do with Holy Spirit theology as the Holy Spirit in binding us to Christ also remarkably sets us free in ways we never imagined before. This is a genuine paradox.

And yet it is not a paradox unfamiliar to us by analogy in other areas of our lives. For instance in science we are discovering this paradox holdstrue; that when we are in bondage to the truth, scientific truth, that truth sets us free and enables whatever we are working on to follow definite laws.

For instance, let's take the science of aerodynamics. When I am working in this science I am obedient to the laws of aerodynamics, that is the basis from which I develop an airplane that will fly. But I can make an airplane that will really be able to fly because it is fully conforming, fully obedient, to the laws of aerodynamics. We can understand this principle. Any boy whoever flew a kite knows that you are able to keep the kite up in the air (it is a little easier said than done, I realize, but still it does work--at least the other fellows standing there seemed to keep their kites up), and the kite stays up in the air precisely because laws of aerodynamics are followed. There is this strange tension between the piece of paper with sticks and the string tied to the ridiculous little fellow standing down on the ground holding on. Now if the kite had a personality and were able to say to itself, "Now if I did not have this string tugging at me I could really soar, and so I think next time I will take a pair of scissors when I go up in the air, and when I get fully extended and am really able to

fly, I will pull out the scissors and cut the string." Well, any boy who ever let go of the handle knows what happens. It happened to me a few weeks ago. I had the kite fully extended in Madera school yard and I was switching hands and the kite went, and I want to tell you what I learned about the law of aerodynamics--when that kite looses its tension with the ground through the means of that string, something about the law of aerodynamics causes the principle of lift to give way and the way that kite is designed it simply comes down to the ground. And believe me, it does not come down to the ground right where you are standing either. It comes down in a eucalyptus tree in somebody else's yard--with a dog!

In other words, this paradox of obedience to truth and freedom, which seems to be a paradox because we think that freedom means that I am not obedient to anything, actually shows that true freedom exists because of the tension between being set free and being held by the Holy Spirit. Freedom should mean, it seems by a certain definition of freedom, that I should be able to do what I want to do. But we are already familiar with the paradox the New Testament is talking about, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free."

By the way, this paradox is etched into the wall at Berkeley High School. It is really true. It is true in science, but it is far truer spiritually, and in the ultimate reality. As we are obedient to the One who made us (this is the logic of our Lord), we develop our fullest freedom, our fullest stride. In ethics and religion very often we forget a principle that we know is true in science. We know that an airplane only flies when it is in obedience to the law of aerodynamics, and yet we over and over again in our lives assume freedom does not have to be obedient to anything.

But the New Testament reminds us of a greater truth, and I want us to reflect on that truth these next two Sundays. I want to reflect on freedom and bondage to truth as the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

What do we mean when we say the Holy Spirit binds us to the truth? John Calvin decided to define the Holy Spirit in this way, "The whole of it comes to this: The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ binds us to himself." What did John Calvin mean by that amazing sentence? It means that the Holy Spirit is the great teacher of the New Testament, and the Holy Spirit is the Comforter.

He is the teacher of the New Testament, and the Holy Spirit is promised by Jesus. And in his ministry as teacher, he draws us always to the True Center--and that true center is Jesus Christ; and the witness to Jesus Christ is the Bible. The Bible which surrounds our Lord Jesus Christ is the witness to him--the Old Testament by anticipation, the New Testament in fulfillment; and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is, according to the New Testament as Jesus said, "I will send the Comforter who will teach you all things concerning me."

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to bind us to the center of God's speech--Jesus Christ. As the ministry of the Holy Spirit binds us to the center, it also binds us to the book, the witness, that surrounds that self-disclosure. The Bible gets its authority in borrowed fashion from its center, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, therefore, is the One who draws us to the witness.

Now I want us to think through this very important doctrine because if there is confusion in the church today, there is confusion at this point. And in order to think through this doctrine in practical terms, I want us to set up some specific examples. I am going to raise three practical examples hypothetically as a means by which to reflect on this terribly important document.

Hypothetical situation No. 1. Now think of this practical situation I must face every week when I preach, and every day when I as a Christian person try to bear witness to my faith where I live, and with people whom I meet--and you must do the same. Let me ask you a specific question. Where do you and I get our message? When it comes to bearing witness to someone else about our Christian faith, where do we get our message? Where do I get the message I am to proclaim to the people of God and those who are inquiring into the Christian faith each Sunday? Where do you get your message?

Let me ask another part of that same question. How do we test the message to see if it is really true? There are several possibilities here. Is the source of the message I proclaim to you, or a Young Life leader speaking at his club, or a youth pastor speaking to you, or a Christian lay person speaking to friends about the Christian faith--is the source from the way we feel? Is that the way I test the message? How I feel about it, and how you feel about it? Do we, in a sense, base our message on

our experience? On the personal journey we have had? The personal experiences we have had of Jesus Christ? The personal experiences we have had of the Holy Spirit? Is that the basis of our message? Or maybe the way we feel about what we have experienced so that what I proclaim to you is the feeling I have this week about my own Christian journey? "I made some discoveries in my own Christian journey this week..." Is that the basis of my message to you?

Hypothetical question No II. (We will try to draw all these together at the end.) Suppose you or I had a great mystical vision. You know what happens? I had the text read this morning from Joel 2 where the prediction was made that young men would dream dreams and old men would see visions. Daniel had several visions. Many people have had visions. I have Christian friends whom I have known to have genuine mystical experiences. I have no reason to doubt them. One has cause to wonder when you look at the world around us and realize the total immensity of reality, who would doubt the possibility of great mystical breakthroughs or great mystical adventures of the human spirit in pondering ultimate realities. Suppose that you or I had a mystical vision or a great spiritual dream. Shall I preach that to you? That is a major question. Shall I use that as a basis of teaching to you?

I just spoke with a person not long ago who had that experience with someone. A person came up to him and said, "I had a great vision about you, and I feel that you should do such and such as a result of the vision I had." If such a person says, "You should leave your job." Or "You should leave your husband or wife," or "You should stay with your wife," or "You should leave this church," or "You should go to that church," based on a vision--do you take that as God's message? I am meeting with people all the time who have those sorts of experiences with other people. Paul grapples with this in the book of Colossians because this was happening in the Colossian church. People were having all kinds of visions.

But now if I were to have a vision, or David Wilkerson were to have a vision as he did (and I believe incorrectly preached on it) and then were to say, "Now on the basis of this vision, here is the message I have to share with you," how does that square with Holy Spirit theology? Shall I proclaim advice on the basis of such an experience? Or to put it theologically, do you build doctrines from your experiences?

Hypothetical question No. III. Very current today in protestant Christianity especially, but also in Catholic Christianity is the tendency to get the message to preach from the current world movements, as if some contemporary revolutionary or social movement is--now listen to this--"obviously the work of the Holy Spirit in our age." There are people who teach this. There are whole schools of liberation theology who teach that when you see a revolutionary movement against social oppression, a cause fighting against racism or against poverty or against social oppression, or for self-actualization--these must be the work of the Spirit today in the world. The Holy Spirit is still at work in the world today; that is true. But starting with that hypothesis we move on to the point that the Holy Spirit is doing all kinds of strange things in the world today. That is true also, but these liberation movements, or some actualization movements, must be the work of the Spirit today, therefore now they have the imprimatur of God upon them. On that basis I can take a machine gun and run somebody down who is an oppressor, if I can classify him as an oppressor and say, "Well, now I am doing what the Holy Spirit is telling me to do."

You see how serious Holy Spirit theology is? Do you see how important the issues are? The crucial question the Christian must always ask is: "Where did you get your message? Where did you get your doctrine? Where do I get my doctrine?" You have a right to ask me that every Sunday when I stand and dare to preach to you--where does the message come from? And how do you test it? How does an ordinary Christian or non-Christian, trying to look in and figure out what in the world Christianity is, test the message to see if it is true? From the way you feel? From your experiences? From mystical visions? Or from social and revolutionary causes?

Let me see if I can pull this together. As I see the New Testament handling of our experiences, for our visions and for our experience of the world we are grateful. We thank God for them--sometimes we painfully thank him for them. But we build doctrines only from the document that surrounds the very self-revelation of God himself--and this is where the authority of the Holy Scriptures comes in.

Now I cannot at this time give you a whole series on the doctrine of the authority of

Scripture. I did this a couple of years ago. There is a lot to be said on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, and that rightly comes under Holy Spirit theology because the New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit will always draw us to True Center, the Holy Spirit does not lead us into truth apart from Christ. That's what Paul says in Colossians. He says, "Do not be influenced by visions puffed up by sensuous minds, not holding fast to the head which is Jesus Christ."

The text we have for today, John 4, says, "Beloved, test the spirits to see if they are of God." What is the test to see if the spirits are of God? "Every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ come in the flesh is of God."

In other words John makes all of the spirits (the winds) testable as to whether they are obedient to Jesus Christ. I believe the Reformed Faith was correct in saying that Jesus Christ is the authority and the document of the self witness of God's own self exposure. The Bible is the document by which we test our experiences, but our experiences do not test the document. As Karl Barth put it, "the Bible looks over our shoulder, we do not look over its shoulder."

Let me repeat that. For our experiences we are grateful. If you have a great dream or vision--thank God! That's wonderful! But you do not preach from that vision. You do not have the right to go up to another Christian and say, "I had a great vision about you that you should leave your wife or your husband and you should obey this or that, or you go here or there." Then you are not in the New Testament tradition. When you do that you are holding to traditions, puffed up by your own sensuous mind, not holding fast to the head. Every Christian who hears something from someone else has a right to test it. And by what do we test it? The Holy Scriptures--Old and New Testaments.

Men and women, can you see now how being bound to Christ sets you free from every wild idea and fanaticism that people want to confront you with? Now you are set free. You are set free by the Center, the Word--Jesus Christ. That's the greatness of Reform Christianity, it is always testable by the Scripture.

Luther, at the Diet of Worms, said, "If you can show me from Scripture I am wrong, I will recant. If you cannot, I cannot recant. God help me. Here I stand." The Holy Scripture is the test.

How important experiences are. When you talk to someone and share your experiences and your own personal journey, that is good, but that is not the source of the message. Otherwise your message is always dependent upon whether you had a good week or a bad week. No, our experiences, our dreams and visions and all simply are part of a witness which we have to bear, which is frail, which is never absolute, which is always relative. You bear a witness, but it is the Word that stands at the center. People build their lives on the Word of God, on God's own self revelation of himself, upon Jesus Christ. He is the Rock--Nothing else. And the Holy Spirit always binds us to the center.

I say the same thing to Liberation Theology. There are many wonderful things in Liberation Theology. After all, the word "liberation" means redemption, and we are for redemption! But every movement that says it is out to liberate people cannot therefore say, "Ah! Because we want to liberate people we must now be the vanguard of the Holy Spirit at work in the world." No, the Holy Spirit will always bind us to the center--Jesus Christ.

Therefore, what work I am in, what vision I see for the world, what great concern I bear in my heart, is always testable by the Holy Spirit's witness to the Word so that others have a right to question me.

Men and women, this is what protects us from fanaticism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer defines a fanatic as "a person who thinks that his moral courage is a match for the age. His moral purity is what will win the day." But the Christian has no such high view of his own experiences. He does not absolutize his own experiences or his own journey because there is only one absolute and that is God Himself.

We should not fear Holy Spirit theology. Some people are afraid it is going to lead them into all kinds of excesses. Oh no! The Holy Spirit will always bind us to Christ. The Holy Spirit will always bind us to the truth and in binding us to the truth, the Holy Spirit will set us free. Amen.

Father, Thank you for binding us to the truth. Lord, we thank thee that Jesus Christ, when lifted up and when the Holy Spirit assures our hearts, sets us free from all of our idols. Amen.



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"JOY"

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One of the very old statements in the Book of Confessions is the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of our Presbyterian denomination. The catechism is questions and answers all the way through and question number one is probably the most famous question of them all. I am sure you have heard it quoted before. "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

I want to talk today about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in enabling you to enjoy God. What did the creed mean, and where did they get that idea that God's will for your life is that you not only glorify God, but enjoy him forever?

Jesus had said it first. In chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 of the gospel of John, in the very center of that section, Jesus says to his disciples, "I do not call you slaves, for a slave does not know what his master does. But I call you friends, if you do what I command you."

In other words he said that it is God's will that we should be friends, that we should not only obey Jesus Christ, but enjoy him.

What does this mean? This word "enjoy" tells us that the Christian life is not simply obedience to God's truth on our part. Now that is a terribly important thing. Two weeks ago I told you the Holy Spirit's ministry binds you and me to Christ and to his authority. Now I want to tell you that that is not

all there is to the Christian life; otherwise the Christian life would be a little bit simpler. The Christian life is not simply obedience to God's will. It is not simply staying close to your brothers and sisters in the church.

We talked about how important it is that the Holy Spirit always unites us to the church--sometimes against our will. The Holy Spirit will always draw you to the church. The Christian life is not hermitage where you go off on a desert island all by yourself and live in splendid isolation with God. As a matter of fact, psychologically, if you were on a desert island for long you would end up in terrific arguments with yourself and would end up your own worst enemy. Even that would not be without turmoil, but the gospel of the ministry of the Holy Spirit always draws you together in the body.

But that is not all there is to the Christian life, otherwise just going to church would be the Christian life, or being related and bound to the brothers and sisters would be the Christian life. But there is more to the Christian life than that. That's what the word "enjoy" means. The word enjoy also means that simply working hard with your gifts and being an effective Christian in the world is not all there is to the Christian life. In the doctrine of gifts we said that God gave you gifts. Yet to say that the Christian life means that you get your gifts and use them effectively for the sake of other people, naturally, isn't the Christian life. No. There is more, and that's what the word enjoy means.

What in the world does this word mean? It means that we are friends, as Jesus says, "I don't call you slaves any more. I call you friends." It means that we are given by the Holy Spirit a final ministry in our lives. All these other things are true, and yet there is something more. The Book of Confessions uses the word "enjoy" to describe that something else. God, by the Holy Spirit, not only wants you to obey him, but he wants you to enjoy him. Not only to glorify him, but to enjoy him all the rest of eternity.

What is this joy? I would like to talk about this as I see it in the New Testament witness. What is it? What causes it? What brings it about? What does the Holy Spirit do in our lives that gives us this

joy? What is the source of Christian enjoyment? When you get right down to it, I enjoy being a Christian. Do you? It is an enjoyable thing to be a Christian. There is a sense of spontaneous joy in the freedom to be friends with God.

How does the Holy Spirit then give me this freedom? I would like to make three reflections. First, it seems to me that this joy comes in the perception or discovery on my part that I am beloved. It is the discovery that you are beloved that gives you joy in the Christian sense, and this sense of love is not only from the Lord God himself, but also from the brothers and sisters. The perception of being loved both by God and by people is what produces joy in the Christian life.

Let me tell you what the perception of love is. The perception of love is to realize that in the face of who I really am, with my shabby soul and all of my pretense in pew and in pulpit, the God who knows me, who knows all about me, the God who does not need anyone to tell him about me, loves me. And when I perceive this, when that breakthrough occurs, there is a tremendous release in my life of joy. It is that shock, and that joy that comes in knowing that the real man or woman I am is beloved of God.

I want to tell you a story. One of the great influences in my life was Henrietta Mears, who was for some forty years the Director of Religious Education at the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. She was the founder of Forest Home Christian Conference Center, the founder of Gospel Light Press and of so many things--a great woman. A woman who had a great influence on Dr. Munger, formerly a pastor here in this church, and on many other people. For years now I have been speaking at the College Briefing Conference in Southern California, and for a long time Miss Mears was always there as the great shepherdess of that conference. She told us one day the story of when her life was changed as a Christian. You know she had a great zest for life. If one person had joy in her life, it was Henrietta Mears. She loved living, and she really loved believing the Lord. She loved trusting him, and she had this spontaneous love for life. She exuded it from every pore of her life. She was sharing with us when her love for life had begun.

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I want to tell you something, men and women, boys and girls, when you perceive that the love of Christ is not just a

general truth, but when you and I perceive that the love is for me, that is what causes joy in the Christian life. There is a tremendous--I want to say explosion. There is a tremendous release of joy in the Christian's life when he discovers the love from God. And you will discover it over and over again, not only when you first discover God's love, but also in discovering the love from the brothers and sisters--that's a further bonus.

Secondly, I believe that joy comes also from the perception of truth. Now this may be a surprise to you. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Now let me see if I can explain that. In perceiving truth there is a tremendous release of joy in your life. Think about it for a moment. Have you ever had the experience of the tremendous joy and release there is in discovering the truth of something? Maybe it is the last word in the "Chronicle" crossword puzzle that you were able to do all by yourself before cheating and looking at it the next day! Those of you who are crossword puzzle freaks know that there is a tremendous joy and excitement in perceiving truth--"Ah, yes! I see it. I get that long word!"

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But let me tell you something. It is a beautiful thing that when you become a Christian the Holy Spirit excites your mind for all kinds of truth. But if it is exciting to study scientific truths and make a scientific breakthrough ...think of the excitement and the joy in discovering the truth that under-

girds everything in life. Our Lord taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And what Jesus is saying at the opening of that prayer is that the kingdom of God, the kingly reign of Almighty God Himself, stands underneath everything in the whole created order. Think of the joy of making the discovery, by the Holy Spirit's witness in your life, that Jesus Christ holds the whole created order together. That he gives meaning to everything in life. That your body, your life, the trees above, the cement, the bricks--everything in the created order, holds together and makes sense because God made a decision underneath it all to give it meaning and worth, and out of love he made you. When the Christian gets this great underpinning to all of life, that's the source of joy. Joy comes in perceiving the truth. "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Well, already you are seeing my definition of joy has to do with freedom, that is the third observation I want to make. Joy comes in the discovery of freedom. Freedom! What in the world does that word mean? We talk about freedom theologically when we talk about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who sets us free.

There are so many things to say about freedom, but for the few moments I have left I am just going to make two reflections. Freedom, in the Christian sense, means being free to be all that we were meant to be. The message of the doctrine of gifts is that God wants you to be something, and you are not really free until you are what God wants you to be; all you were meant to be--and that's freedom.

Freedom is reaching your full stride. Remember that image of the kite two weeks ago. Freedom is a kite flying with all the string out as high as it can go. God meant you to be free, and when you reach your stride, when you are able to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith," when you are able to use your gifts, there is a freedom. That is the gift of the Holy Spirit and with that freedom comes a tremendous joy.

But now I want to give you a mysterious truth that is the other side of the coin. We can only touch on it, but let me just suggest to you that part of Christian freedom is reaching your stride, and part of Christian freedom also means coming full

circle and being set free from yourself and from your gifts. Now this is a new thought we have not yet caught during this series.

Let me tell you something amazing God wants to do with your life. He wants to set you free to have gifts, and that will happen in the early part of your Christian life when you get your gifts. And then as you mature, from my understanding of the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will set you free from your gifts so that the mature Christian will not always know the gifts he has. Somebody comes up to a young Christian and asks, "Are you really a gifted person?" He will say, "Oh yes! I have these gifts."

The older Christian matures like Paul. Paul starts out as a chief apostle in his book of Galatians in the early part of his writings, and when he gets to the end of his writings he is the chief sinner. He has grown.

But as you get freer and freer as you grow in the Holy Spirit, you actually develop a kind of lack of self-consciousness about yourself. You, in a real sense, get set free from your gifts, set free from yourself. So sometimes trying to actualize your gifts can cause trouble in you marriage, especially if you feel that you have been held back in your marriage by not being able to use all of your gifts. I think it is right that the Holy Spirit wants to set you free to discover all your gifts, but I believe you need to be prepared to learn that as you grow in the Holy Spirit, you are going to grow toward not needing to actualize and hold on and cling to all your gifts.

But now you will understand what Jesus meant in Luke 9 when he said, "He that would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me, for he who would save his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it." You will come full circle. That is what the Holy Spirit will do to you. That's joy. That is the joy of being forgetful about yourself. It is the joy of not keeping account of all the things you are doing for everybody else. It is the joy of not knowing how great you are. It is the joy of not caring. It is the joy of being forgetful about yourself and losing track of all your gifts. It is the joy of following Jesus Christ, and being so safe in Jesus Christ's love that you can relax. It is the joy of sitting on an airplane seat and not having to bear witness, but just relaxing and being the person God created. It is the joy of being under no pressure at all. It is the joy

of just belonging to Jesus Christ and letting his life shine through you.

Add them all together--Joy!

Heavenly Father, We thank you for what you do in our lives through the Holy Spirit--how you bind us to Christ; how you assure us of his love; how you set us free; how you set us free even from ourselves so that husbands and wives do not have to keep score of how the other person is holding them back or putting them ahead. So that young scientists and young doctors do not have to be one up on the person alongside; so that young pastors, and older pastors, and young Christians and older Christians can relax and be at peace, belonging to Jesus Christ and under pressure from no one.

Lord, give us the joy of the Holy Spirit who sets us free to belong to you so that we may glorify God and enjoy him forever. Amen.



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Let me tell you what the perception of love is. The perception of love is to realize that in the face of who I really am, with my shabby soul and all of my pretense in pew and in pulpit, the God who knows me, who knows all about me, the God who does not need anyone to tell him about me, loves me. And when I perceive this, when that breakthrough occurs, there is a tremendous release in my life of joy. It is that shock, and that joy that comes in knowing that the real man or woman I am is beloved of God.

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But now I want to give you a mysterious truth that is the other side of the coin. We can only touch on it, but let me just suggest to you that part of Christian freedom is reaching your stride, and part of Christian freedom also means coming full

circle and being set free from yourself and from your gifts. Now this is a new thought we have not yet caught during this series.

Let me tell you something amazing God wants to do with your life. He wants to set you free to have gifts, and that will happen in the early part of your Christian life when you get your gifts. And then as you mature, from my understanding of the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will set you free from your gifts so that the mature Christian will not always know the gifts he has. Somebody comes up to a young Christian and asks, "Are you really a gifted person?" He will say, "Oh yes! I have these gifts."

The older Christian matures like Paul. Paul starts out as a chief apostle in his book of Galatians in the early part of his writings, and when he gets to the end of his writings he is the chief sinner. He has grown. But as you get freer and freer as you grow in the Holy Spirit, you actually develop a kind of lack of self-consciousness about yourself. You, in a real sense, get set free from your gifts, set free from yourself. So sometimes trying to actualize your gifts can cause trouble in you marriage, especially if you feel that you have been held back in your marriage by not being able to use all of your gifts. I think it is right that the Holy Spirit wants to set you free to discover all your gifts, but I believe you need to be prepared to learn that as you grow in the Holy Spirit, you are going to grow toward not needing to actualize and hold on and cling to all your gifts.

But now you will understand what Jesus meant in Luke 9 when he said, "He that would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me, for he who would save his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it." You will come full circle. That is what the Holy Spirit will do to you. That's joy. That is the joy of being forgetful about yourself. It is the joy of not keeping account of all the things you are doing for everybody else. It is the joy of not knowing how great you are. It is the joy of not caring. It is the joy of being forgetful about yourself and losing track of all your gifts. It is the joy of following Jesus Christ, and being so safe in Jesus Christ's love that you can relax. It is the joy of sitting on an airplane seat and not having to bear witness, but just relaxing and being the person God created. It is the joy of being under no pressure at all. It is the joy

of just belonging to Jesus Christ and letting his life shine through you.

Add them all together--Joy!

Heavenly Father, We thank you for what you do in our lives through the Holy Spirit--how you bind us to Christ; how you assure us of his love; how you set us free; how you set us free even from ourselves so that husbands and wives do not have to keep score of how the other person is holding them back or putting them ahead. So that young scientists and young doctors do not have to be one up on the person alongside; so that young pastors, and older pastors, and young Christians and older Christians can relax and be at peace, belonging to Jesus Christ and under pressure from no one.

Lord, give us the joy of the Holy Spirit who sets us free to belong to you so that we may glorify God and enjoy him forever. Amen.



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I

"PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

First in a series of four sermons preached at  
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John 21:1-19

In the book of Colossians I ran into a great text that deals with the subject for these four Sundays. It is the prayer Paul gives at the opening of that letter for Colossian Christians. It starts with the third verse of the first chapter: "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ and of the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."

I am going to translate "the hope laid up for you" as God's ultimate decision about our history. That is what he means by heaven. Notice the text. Paul says, "I am thankful for the love and the faith." Those are two virtues that you have--the freedom virtues. They are yours, but they are founded upon hope that has nothing to do with you at all. That's what God has done. That is His decision. It is laid up for you, and he speaks of it in foundation terms. "Your faith and your love are founded," he says, "upon the hope which is laid up for you in heaven. Of this you heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel."

The hope is based on God's decision. Paul says you heard about that decision in the truth of the gospel. The gospel is true, quite apart from whether you believe it or not, or whether you live it out or not. The love and faith are founded upon the hope and the truth.

During these four weeks I want to work with those four words--faith, love, hope and truth. I think Paul has mentioned in that prayer four tremendous ingredients of the Christian life. Four ingredients of practicing the presence of God. If you practice God's presence, and if you get to know who God is and form a relationship with the Lord, you are going to discover what these four words mean. As a basic series of thoughts and sermons to begin our fall season, I want us to reflect on what it is like to experience these results of the presence of God.

Today I want to begin with the word love.  
What does Paul mean when he says he is thankful that they have love at work within the church? In order to grapple with this text, I want to turn your attention to John 21. It is an exciting text, an unforgettable text. Peter greatly interests me. Peter and Paul, as a matter of fact, are the two disciples who have become most clear to us. We know the most about them as a result of the New Testament witness, and I want us to try to understand where Peter is at this point in his life.

John 20 has told us about the resurrection of Christ. All the chapters before tell us of the ministry that culminates in the death of Christ. Peter knows something--he knows who Jesus Christ is. He knows that Jesus Christ is Lord, and he knows that He is alive. He has made the discovery. He is not a doubter like Thomas. Also in John 20 we see that Thomas comes to believe it too. So, in other words, the truth question is settled for Peter. The truth about who Christ is and what he has done is settled. Peter doesn't know everything he is going to know, but he knows about the mission Christ has for him. Earlier we saw that Jesus said that the very keys of the kingdom were placed in Peter's hands, and Peter was challenged to loose and unlock. He was challenged to be the head of the church, and that has already happened. He also knows the mission that he is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of Christ's life and death and victory. But still Peter needs to know something else. This narrative, this postscript in the gospel of John, may be a very crucial link in our full understanding of who Peter is. It may very well be that John wrote this postscript so that we might have a clear focus of who Peter really is, and understand what makes him tick.

I will show you why I call it a postscript. The 20th chapter ends with the 31st verse which gives an ending of John's gospel, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

We expect John then to say "Amen"--end of book. But a little bit like Paul, who

buzzes the airport several times in some of his books (like in the Philippian letter, he ends the book three times), he is just about ready to end, but then he thinks of one more thing and zooms off again. John does the same thing. He remembers one more incident that he decides is important to put in. I want us to look at the 21st chapter and see what the ingredients are, and try to understand that one further ingredient needed for resolution of his life.

"After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias [that would be Galilee]; and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin [doubting Thomas from chapter 20], Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee [James and John], and two other of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing."

Now I am going to hazard an interpretation of this passage. Believe me, this is a tentative interpretation, but a hypothesis I believe makes sense on the basis of what happens in the passage. I believe this may be the dynamic cue that you need to understand the passage. I am going to hypothesize and suggest to you that Peter, at the beginning of this passage, is depressed. I think maybe I can figure out why.

Peter is aware that Jesus Christ has won a victory--has won THE victory. He even is aware of and has observed the resolution of doubt in Thomas' life. But Peter himself is not resolved. The victory Christ has won is in Peter's mind still overshadowed by his own personal failure. This is my theory. I believe this is an interpretative clue that may help this passage to make sense to us, and it makes sense to me psychologically. Peter has observed Christ's victory, but he cannot get out of his mind his own overwhelming failure. Jesus may have won, but Peter lost. He lost in the midst of Jesus' winning. It was on the very eve of our Lord's trial and then crucifixion that Peter denied with oaths and swearing that he ever even knew Jesus--though Jesus wins the victory, and on Easter morning Peter is informed of it and rejoices in it--he is now in depression.

Those of you who have experienced depression perhaps can really understand this and appreciate it. People who are in depression are usually not buoyed up and helped by other people's victories. It is like walking by a street when you feel lonely and isolated and you see a family that is happy and joyous. That does not necessarily make you feel good. It is one of

the reasons why depressed people have such a hard time at Christmas. They see other people happy, other people experiencing the victory of relationship and joy, but they feel out of it and alone.

I feel this is the way this passage begins. I think Peter feels a nagging sense of overwhelming loneliness that comes from the defeat of his own denial of Christ, and though Christ has won, Peter is still stunned. Everything is blunted by the fact that he has lost, and in this condition he decides to do something that he feels good about.

I have often suggested to depressed people that they do something they like to do. Peter likes to fish. He feels good about fishing. He does not feel good about taking the keys of the kingdom right now and going out and being the head of the church. Yet that is what Jesus commanded him to do. Peter is in no mood to take the keys of the kingdom and start unlocking, yet that is what this text said he was to do. However, he is depressed and he goes fishing. I think it is kind of tender that after Peter says, "I am going fishing," all these fellows, including Thomas, the melancholy loner, now decide to stick with Peter in Peter's depression.

Peter says, "I am going fishing," and they say to him, "We will go with you." They did not say, "Peter, shape up." They do not say, "Peter, now let's remind you of your mission." or "Peter, let's remind you of all the things you should know about the gospel and should be doing right now. You are the head of the church, and everything is bogged down waiting for you to make a move." They don't say that evidently. They say, "We will go with you, Peter."

Maybe the best thing you can give a person who is depressed is yourself. Staying alongside them, waiting a while without a whole lot of comment. That is what the disciples do.

Let's read on in the text. "Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, have you any fish?'" That word, children, is a Greek diminutive. It is hard to translate into English. It is an affectionate phrase, like we might use "sonny".

"'Have you caught any fish?' 'No.'" Very

brief, succinct and to the point. "He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.'" So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" (He had better eyesight. He was a younger fellow!) "When Simon Peter heard it, he put on his clothes and sprang into the sea."

Now he is the leader again. "You fellows bring in the fish. I have to go in and see the Lord." And so he jumped into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about 100 yards off."

Don't you love John's account? He has all these little details that the other writers avoid, little technical points.

"When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them."

These are poor men, so they count the fish--every one. Another detail from John.

"And although there were so many, the net was not torn." This evidently becomes for John an important sign as he reflects on this event. "So Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew he was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and so with the fish." Now then John ends the incident by saying, "This was the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter [here is one of the most famous interviews we have of Christ in the New Testament], 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?'"

Most interpreters do not believe that "these" means the other disciples, but these fish and fishing. "He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Then Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Then he said, 'Tend my sheep.'"

I want you to notice something. This is all present tense. Jesus does not say to Simon Peter, "Peter, are you sorry for swearing in the garden? Are you sorry for pulling your

sword and slashing Malchus' ear off? Are you sorry for using the Lord's name in vain, and denying me three times? Are you sorry for the rat you were when I needed you the most?"

He does not ask Simon how he feels about the past. He asks Simon how he feels about the present. I want to interpret that theologically in just a moment, but I wanted to observe that. It is not, "Simon, are you sorry about the past?" It is, "Simon, do you love me now?" And Simon says, "yes" twice.

Now the third time Jesus asks, Simon Peter is distressed. He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John. Do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.'"

This is really a different Simon from the Peter who pulled the dagger out. The man who said, "Though everybody else leaves you, I will not forsake you." "Those other guys, they probably will leave, that's the kind of guys they are, but I won't--and then he did." He fell the furthest really. No, this is a new Simon. He says, "Lord, you know everything. I give up. You know I do love you." So Jesus accepts it as he accepted it each time, and he says, "All right, feed my sheep."

I want to try to interpret what happened in this dialogue, and in this event. What is Simon discovering most of all? And the other disciples too? And also, you and me. Most of all, it seems to me, Simon is discovering the meaning of the love of Jesus Christ for him. That's what Paul is going to later remind us of when he tells us that God loves us in the Colossian text. Most of all Simon is discovering God's love in his life.

I want to reflect on five different directions I see in this text. I want you to look at the marks of love that come from practicing the presence of God. That when we get into the presence of Jesus Christ, and that is where Simon and the others are on this final postscript to the gospel of John.

I want you to see what the love of Christ is like. It is what you and I need so much today. I want you to see it in Peter's life. I have five observations to make.

First: It began for Peter with a few loyal friends. Think of it--this text preserved for us that the beginning of Peter's discovery of the love of Christ began with a few loyal fellows who decided to stick with him. I have already alluded to them. Now let us reflect on his experience of love from these fellows who stay with him. I think that we in the Christian church often forget just how therapeutic we really can be toward people just by the fact that we are together and that we can stick with people and hang in with them. What about the uprooted person? What about the lonely person? What about the depressed person? I think we have forgotten how to be the church.

What about this guy Peter at the Lake of Galilee? The beginning of Peter's discovery of the love of Christ begins with these disciples Christ gave him, the friends that Jesus brought alongside of Peter. These men who maybe say to themselves--we heard Jesus tell you that with the keys of the kingdom you could unlock the gates of hell and nothing could prevail against you. It is ringing in our ears that we are supposed to be doing something gigantic in this world. But Peter, we know you are down, and you want to go fishing, so we will go with you. And Peter begins to experience love just by their companionship.

Second: Jesus' way of finding and making true and accurate contact with Peter and those other disciples was also a sign of love. This is so impressive to me. Peter is depressed and he goes fishing; and Jesus knows where to find him and how to get through to him. Do you remember how Peter first became a Christian? Luke fortunately preserved that for us in Luke 5.

Peter had followed Jesus in a tentative sort of way. He is a very tough thinking guy. He saw signs and miracles, he saw people healed, he heard speeches and then even saw his own mother-in-law healed. But still he is not particularly impressed. Finally Jesus says to him in the middle of the afternoon one day, "Peter, let's go fishing." Peter says, "You don't go fishing in the middle of the afternoon. You are a carpenter and you may know all about carpentry, but you don't know about fishing." After all, fishermen have the nets all folded in tiny pleats. It's a big job to fold them and he knows he has to go out that night to fish. They had fished the previous night and not caught anything. But he says, "Okay, we'll go." Jesus said, "Put your net down here." They put the net down and caught a huge catch of fish.

If you remember Luke's gospel, as soon as that catch of fish was in, Peter fell down on his face before Jesus and said, "Lord, depart from me for I am a sinful man." And that is the first sign we have of Peter saying, "Lord," to Jesus as if he is his Lord. In other words, Jesus Christ had to outfish Peter.

Our Lord does it again now, and when that happens John says, "Hey, that fellow who told us to put the net on this side--it's the Lord!" Peter says, "The Lord?" Suddenly all his depression is snapped, he jumps off the boat and comes in. Jesus Christ knew how to make accurate contact with Peter.

Men and women, that is the love of God. Listen--that has not changed. One of the most amazing things about the gospel of Christ is its ability to make contact with you. I have seen it so vividly in the last couple of weeks, having conversations with students and seeing how a student looks at his life and then looks at the gospel, looking at the gospel's analysis of life; its analysis of your worth; its analysis of your sexual nature; its analysis of your destiny and your purpose for your life; its whole view of sin and the forgiveness of sin. It makes accurate contact with your life. It fits well. It harmonizes with your second thoughts. It makes sense. Jesus does this to Peter at the lake. That's love! Love has to be able to talk to you without an accent. Love has to be able to break through the shell that you put up around yourself. Thank God if you give Jesus Christ a chance, he is able to reveal himself in a way that makes sense to you.

Third: I want now to theologially interpret those three questions Jesus asks Peter. Why does Jesus say three times, "Do you love me, Peter?" "Do you love me, Peter?" "Do you love me, Peter?" Many interpreters have observed that he does this three times because Peter denied him three times. He wants to cancel out three denials. Jesus is a very basic earthy teacher, a simple way to cancel out three denials is to ask three questions and it is done.

But there is a profounder theological point to observe. Jesus takes Peter from the past tense, which is all depression and loneliness and grief, and puts him squarely into the present tense and future tense. "Feed my sheep." That's future tense.

"Do you love me?" That's present tense.

Now look folks, Jesus does this to Peter because standing between the present tense and the past is the cross of Christ. Jesus is teaching Peter in a simple and basic way that he himself at Mount Calvary has taken the failure and denial of Peter and disarmed it. He has taken the sin of the past. He has disarmed the sin of the past and its wrath and fury, and now he puts Peter squarely into the present. Only the Lord is able to forgive you of your sins, and that is what Jesus Christ has done.

Now it is embarrassing for Peter to have that happen. He gets squeezed, especially on the third question. It is embarrassing, folks, to be forgiven for your sins, but it is the love of Christ that works. He does embarrass us as he shows us that we do not have to live in the past. We can live in the present and future because of the cross and victory of Christ.

Fourth: I want to make the observation that Peter is given a big job to do. He is told to feed the sheep. He is told to nourish the sheep. If I can say it simply, Jesus tells Peter that the love he is now experiencing, the acceptance that he is now experiencing, is not a sort of deadend street in Peter's life. Love never works that way. Any of you who have experienced the love of Christ know how true this is. The love of Christ is not something you can put into a little container on the shelf in your life. The love of Christ is not a static reality, but a dynamic reality. It is always going to work through your life. You cannot grasp it and hold it. You can only let it work through you. So Peter discovered in, "Do you love me?" that the implication is, "I love you, Peter. Now feed my sheep. Nourish them with the acceptance I have given you." So Peter is given a task to do. Now this man is ready for his mission to start unlocking those doors.

Fifth: One final observation I have to make involves the very next incident after this marvelous interview. Peter looks over and sees John standing there. Then Peter, back to his old ways (we seldom have spectacular, sudden conversions--just gradual ones. Peter is going to have relapses, and now he has one.) looks over and sees John. They had had a little friction. He asks, "Lord, what about that disciple?" What about John? And Jesus cuts him off, asserting his sovereignty. Did you know that Christ's love is also sovereign? That Jesus Christ's love has justice in it? Has Lordship in it? He does not allow us to know anybody

else's story but our own. Jesus said to Peter, "You follow me, Peter. John will follow too." He does not answer Peter's question, "What about that man? What is he supposed to do?"

Remember in The Horse and His Boy by C.S. Lewis when Shasta has this marvelous experience with Aslan? After his experience it suddenly occurs to him that his friend was scratched on the back by Aslan. (Aslan is the great Christ figure in the Chronicles of Narnia). So Shasta asks Aslan, "Why did you scratch her on the back?" And Aslan replies, "I tell no one any one's story but their own."

Peter has to learn that. I want to suggest to you that when you discover Christ's love for you, you discover he loves others too. What Peter discovered is that he is beloved. Then, as sort of a P.S. to the P.S., Peter discovers that John is loved too--that John has his own story. John has his own relationship with Christ not subject to Peter. Peter may be leader of the church, but Peter is not the Lord of the church. So he discovers that other people are beloved too.

One of the greatest experiences of the love of Christ when you practice the presence of Christ's love is to discover that his love is so great that many, many people all around you, in fact the whole world, are the recipients of his love. Even though the world does not even know it. In fact, our task now in feeding the sheep is to let the world know of that love. It is great to know his love is so big, that he is such a good shepherd that he is able to love others as well as me. It means the depression he may solve in my life, the loneliness in my life--he can also solve in my neighbor's life. That's good to know. That is the love of Christ, and when you practice its presence, that is what you experience.

How can you experience it? By simply saying "yes". Isn't it interesting that all that Peter had to say in this whole narrative was yes? He had to put the net on the other side of the boat and pull the fish in. They have to come into the shore and eat the fish. And then he has to say, "Yes, Lord, I do love you." He had to be responsive and say "yes" to what God was doing in his life. That is all it takes to become a Christian and experience his love. Amen.



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II

"PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD"

"FAITH"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Second in a series of four sermons preached at  
First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

September 14, 1975

Matthew 7:24 - 29

Today I want to talk about faith. Last week we considered love. What exactly is involved in believing in God, trusting in God? Jesus talks about the dynamics of faith as he closes his Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the book of Matthew. After all the tremendously powerful, electric, startling things Jesus said in that Sermon on the Mount, he closes with reflections which really, in a sense, preoccupy most of the seventh chapter. Reflections, reactions and teaching from Jesus on the meaning of faith. We will start with Matthew 7:21.

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.' [And now this very important sentence which summarizes what he has just said] 'Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock, and the rain fell, and the floods came, and winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like the foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and they beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.'" That last sentence means that the fall was total. It completely fell.

And now the final sentence in this sermon, "When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."

You have to understand a little bit about how the scribes taught. They tended to teach in an equivocal way, playing off truths against each other. The scribe method would be--on the one hand there is this, and on the other hand there is this, and there is one point on this side, and one on this side. But Jesus does not teach that way, and that was startling to the people. This is direct and dramatic and costly teaching, and that struck the people. He taught with authority--not like the scribes taught.

There is one technical point I want to observe in the passage which you would not necessarily know as an English reader of the text, and that is the play on the word "rock." Jesus tells a little parable after he makes his point that, "Every one who hears these words of mine and does them will be like the wise person who builds their house upon the rock." Now you have to understand that to the Hebrew speaking audience hearing this word "rock" it is a very significant word in the Hebrew language. In the Old Testament, Hebrew words do double duty. This language is primitive, a basic language in which abstract words are not really present, with rare exceptions, unlike the Greek language and our own. For instance, the Old Testament does not have a word for discouragement. That is an abstract idea. Instead the Old Testament will say that when Cain was discouraged, "his countenance fell." In other words, it expresses concretely what he felt. Also, the Old Testament does not have an abstract word for anger, instead the word burn will be used. Cain burned toward Abel--that's the literal Hebrew. Now when you read the English text they change it and say he was angry at Abel. A concrete word to express the feeling.

The same thing is true for the Old Testament word for faith or faithfulness. The Old Testament does not use an abstract word, but a literal, concrete word. It is the word foundation--threshold or rock. That is why in Psalms so many times in the English translation they do preserve this with all that marvelous language--"The Lord is my Rock, my fortress." The Hebrew word for fortress, rock, foundation which is used is one of the rare Hebrew

words that has come across into the English language. One of those, the most famous I suppose, would be the word "hallelujah." That is a Hebrew word literally translated into English. Another Hebrew word that is transliterated into English is this word for rock, and it is the Hebrew word "amen." So I alert you to that. Jesus now uses the Greek word rock, "the man who was wise built his house on the rock," and everybody in the audience listening to him remembers the Old Testament word "amen," rock, faithfulness, the foundation, God's foundation. That is the underpinning for this text.

Let's talk about faith, faithfulness, as Jesus teaches it to us in this text. Now there are two key words to understand our Lord's teaching on faith. Faith is one of the essential ingredients of practicing the presence of God. You spend much time in the presence of God, thinking about who God is and his meaning for your life, and you will run into the words faith, belief, trust, believing.

What do they mean? Jesus says, "Every one who hears these words of mine and does them will be like the wise person who built his house on the rock." Hear and do; these are the two key words. They are very common in our Lord's vocabulary. "Every one who hears these words and does them." Over and over again in the teaching of Jesus the word hear is used, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And now this word "do," "He who hears and does my Father's will." "Who does my work."

Now I want to observe these two words together. Both of them are freedom words. They are words that you have the right to implement. Only you can hear. No one can hear for you, even God does not intend to hear for you. That's what Jesus says. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." God has no intention of cancelling out your eardrums and bombarding your brain directly without your ears being used. You have the right to hear, to listen, to sift, and decide.

God also does not do for you what he calls upon you now to do. According to our Lord's text, that is another freedom word--the doing is yours. You have the right, the responsibility and the freedom to build the house. The implication of our Lord's teaching is that everybody is in the process of building a house. The crucial question, of course, is where he builds the house. Every one of us is involved in building a house.

The point of the text is--where are you building it? That is determined by what you hear, and what you decide, and where you decide to build. There is no escaping either, so both are freedom words. They are your words. That is the first insight we want to make about faith. In the New Testament, faith is yours. It is not something God does for you.

Next week we will talk about hope. Hope is a different matter. Hope is something we get from God. It is the foundation. It is going to be our reflection upon the amen. But faith is yours.

Both to hear and to do in faith are indispensable. They cannot be separated from each other.

At this point we have to make a second observation. Each one is inseparable from the other. In Jesus' text he says, "He who hears my words and does them." That means that Jesus is not advocating that everybody go out and build a house. As a matter of fact, the previous paragraph says some people will go up to the Lord and say, "Did I not prophesy in your name? Did I not cast out demons? Did I not do many mighty works? I built many houses." And Jesus is going to say, "Depart from me you evildoer. You did not build them on the rock. You did not find out where to build them. The doing is not enough. The hearing must occur first--the discovery." Jesus puts the two indissolubly together. You have to discover (that's how I'm going to interpret the word here) what is true and substantive; what is authentic. God does not take that out of your hands. He gives you the right to make that discovery. Faith is a freedom word. It is a word that is placed in your hands, so that faith then is going to involve the discovery of what is true and substantive.

And then the building, the doing, is in response to what I have discovered. In other words I am to discover what is true, and then I am to personally, directly, concretely respond to what I have discovered. That is Christian faith.

There it is, folks. It is no leap into the dark. It is no dramatic venture or majestic Winchester House that I am going to do carpentry on for 35 years with meaningless stairways and meaningless little doors on a meaningless foundation. The Christian's house is going to

involve a hearing and a discovery of what is substantive and true, and you have to make that discovery. And then build a house, a meaningful house, upon that discovery. Faith is going to be a lifelong venture of putting those two together.

The scientific method is precisely the same thing. Jesus is not anti-scientific. He is presenting us with the very dimensions that are present in scientific methods. Scientific research, whether it be the social sciences or physics, chemistry and mathematics, is involved in the same process of discovery and gathering of evidence, data, material and information; and then on the basis of discovery, developing and implementing an hypothesis which leads to conclusions. Sometimes those conclusions are on the basis of incomplete and non-total data. In fact, there is no such thing as total data or complete evidence. But when on the basis of the collection of data I have enough evidence, then I venture to conclusions.

Albert Einstein did this in his general theory of relativity. He gathered data. He was not able to absolutely prove a great number of the essential tenets in the data he gathered, but on the basis of his data, on the basis of scientific experimentation, mainly mathematical, he came up with conclusions in the general theory of relativity out of which the whole modern science of atomic fusion was developed. On the basis of premises that were discovered, a house was built, and that house--the whole modern atomic science--was built on the basis of discoveries made. Now there were some risks involved, and the risks had to do in that movement from discovery of what is true, over to the house built. There is no escaping the risk. Did you notice that in our Lord's teaching he preserved that risk element? He makes it clear to us that the rains will come and will test the foundation. That is in our Lord's teaching. He said that when we build the house, when we select the foundation (and we are in the process of doing this all our lives), it will be tested.

In fact, in Luke's account, the testing is more overwhelmingly portrayed than in Matthew's account. In Luke's record of the parable, he adds an element Matthew omits, when our Lord says, "the rains fell, the winds came and the river broke its banks and came in against the house ." That is an even more terrifying portrayal of the testing of the foundation. The river breaking its banks, coming in, flowing over your

foundation posts and your timbers. Wow! That house had better be well built if a flood is going to come that way, and a river is going to break in. Jesus says that there will be that testing. Therefore, there is a risk involved in building the house of faith. It is going to be tested throughout the existence of your life.

Now let's see what this might mean--this hearing and doing that is faith. Let's think of it in three directions.

First of all, faith has to do with my heart, so that having discovered, having heard, and discovered the love of Jesus Christ for me and for the world, I respond to that love. I believe it, and I build a house upon it. I decide to wager my life on it. That's faith when it comes to my heart.

Last week we considered love, and I just want you to see that in the dimension of faith, John gives us the record of Peter having his faith now solidified in his discovery of the love of Jesus Christ for him in John 21. That's how I decided to interpret that 21st chapter. That what is happening in John's postscript to the gospel is that he wants us to see Peter's discovery of Christ's love for him, and not only for Peter but also for the world. That is why I put those together. The New Testament never treats it as if it were a separate category. For instance Nicodemus, after he discovers Christ's love for him, then hears the words from Jesus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish." So it is with the discovery of God's love.

In a moment I want to talk about the intellectual side of faith which is also vital. I have tried to talk to you about the love side of faith first, because there is no building of faith on intellectual, logical grounds alone. No, I have to have what Peter had in the 21st chapter of John and in this whole experience of Christ. I not only have to have the logic of it, the meaning of it, come clear, but I have to have my heart satisfied. I have to have enough data that assures me that Jesus Christ knows my name; that Jesus Christ is able to find me as he found Peter; that Jesus Christ knows my heart; that Jesus Christ is able to find me and make connection with me; that Jesus Christ is able to break through the shell I build up around my heart to protect myself. But Jesus

Christ is able to redeem me. He is able to forgive my sins. He cares for me. That's faith.

Faith needs that discovery, but having discovered that love, I then have to build on it, and that's the freedom side of faith. He who hears this love, and discovers it in terms that make sense to him, and then responds to it. You have to respond to love. It is true interpersonally as well. It is not enough to say "Oh! my parents really love me." I have to respond to that love to complete the cycle, so that there is faith and response. Here's faith as the response of my heart to the love that I have experienced. I have to put it to the test. I have to build on it. This is true in romantic love. It is true in the love between people and parents and children. It is true in fraternal and platonic love. It is true in our relationship with God. Faith has to do with my heart so that when I discover the love of Christ it makes sense to me and I respond.

Let us move to the intellectual side of faith. Faith also has to do with my mind. After a little more discussion of this in detail, I want to say also that faith has to do with our will, which is the synthesizing of the two. Faith has to do with my mind so that becoming convinced of the meaning and the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I trust in his integrity. That's faith. I have faith when I trust in the integrity of Jesus Christ--God's Holy Speech. Christian faith is making the radical claim that God has spoken for himself in history, that he has made himself known, that he has shared his character with human history. Faith occurs when I trust that speech, when it makes sense to me. Jesus is calling upon me to test it. He says, "You are going to have to build a house on this rock. You are going to have to decide whether the rock is the true amen. Whether it is substantive enough to hold the house."

What does this mean? It means that Christian faith occurs when the meaningfulness and the integrity of the Christian affirmation makes sense to me. This means that faith is not faith in faith, but faith in fact or a foundation that is substantive enough to build your life on. There is so much thought today about faith in faith. Faith as though it were openness to the future. Faith as though it were a kind of conviction I hold as I stand against everything, as I look toward the future, and this is then often thought of as faith in God. Or faith is thought of as just sort of clearing my head of everything and

being open--an openness toward people, or an openness to ultimacy or to deity or deism wherever it might come from. But this is not Christian faith.

I want to read you a quotation from probably the most important theologian in the German world today--Wolfhart Pannenberg. He is a young theologian who is having a great impact on the theological world today. He has written a book, translated into English recently, called The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions. In the opening section of this book he discusses the first phrase of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe." He makes an interesting point that I will read to you, and then reflect on. He says, "Faith cannot be without an object. In the act of trust a man [or a woman] forsakes himself and anchors himself to the thing or person on which he relies." You see, that is what Jesus said when he talked about that rock upon which you build a house. "Consequently, since man cannot live without trust, he is dependent upon the truly trustworthy becoming apparent to him." Now here Pannenberg is saying that we have to discover the truly trustworthiness of God. We have to discover it in terms that we can understand.

And then he says, "For Isaiah, this would be the God of Israel as truly trustworthy. For the early Christian, who in this early Creed repeated the words, "I believe" three times; 'I believe in God the Father;' 'I believe in God the Son;' 'I believe in God the Holy Spirit;' they were the three-fold I believes. They said they believed in the God whose Son had appeared on earth, Jesus Christ, and who is present today through his Holy Spirit to those who believe in him. The true God who reveals his love for men through Jesus Christ was for them the unshakable foundation on which a man can unconditionally build his life."

Now what is Pannenberg really pressing for so hard here? In other words he says, "Faith cannot exist in the Christian sense without an object worthy of it." Of course he is taking on so many modern theologians who have gone in the other direction. Men like Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann who in effect were so preoccupied with faith, with the dynamics of the Easter faith, and the faith of the church that they missed the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. Faith is seen by them in terms of its dynamics. But God himself, having spoken, having broken through for himself in Jesus

Christ, this is secondary. The faith of the church is not the important thing, your having faith is what is important. It does not really make that much difference in the long run where the faith is placed, as long as you have the dynamics of faith. If by that you mean openness toward the future, openness toward whatever God might do in some vague sense, Pannenberg says that is not good enough. The Apostles' Creed says that is not good enough. Jesus says that is not good enough. Faith is not just faith in faith. A lot of people tell me, "I wish I had more faith." No, I wish they had a better foundation for faith. The faith will come and grow if you have a foundation that is worthy. Now you have to work with it. Jesus said you have to hear it and you have to do it. You have to build on it. It is not enough to say, "Lord, Lord" because Jesus is Lord. It is not enough to say intellectually, logically, I see the truth of it. You have to build on it. Faith is founded upon its object. The worthiness of the object of faith is the crucial element, and therefore faith has to do with your mind. Our Lord now is inviting you to enter into a dialogue with him, to enter into a journey where you test out the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ. You are invited to do it. You are invited to test his faithfulness.

Let me invite you to begin a journey where you put faith to the test. Whether you are a Christian or not, this is your lifelong venture--to decide what is a substantive enough and a deep enough foundation to build a house on. One that can stand the stresses of the wind and rain and floods and the river when it breaks its banks. Because whatever house you build is going to be tested that way. Let me invite you to begin this testing with your heart, discovering God's love by reading the New Testament and becoming involved with the people of God who have discovered his love: And with your mind discovering intellectually to your own satisfaction that the Christian gospel holds together and makes sense.

I want to say more about that next week when we talk about the ground of our hope, and then finally with our will. Faith has to do with our will, so that when all this finally jells and makes sense, we can venture it and decide to build the house.

Doubt is a very essential part of the discovery of faith, but doubt by itself always stops short of building the house for fear it might build a house that would crash. Jesus is not honoring that. He does not honor the person who says I am going to opt for a third solution. I will not even build a house because I see floods coming. Jesus says, "The

floods are coming but build the house. Just build it on the rock."

The test is not having the facts. Pascal, a great fifteenth century Christian physicist, said that anyone could stand on a plank two feet wide and walk across in perfect safety and no one would be worried. But place that plank over a 1,000 foot gulch and very few people would do it. It is perfectly safe, but your imagination undoes you. Your fears all creep in and you begin to be worried about walking on that plank.

We are in an age in which we are always making safe decisions. Our Lord is teaching the same sort of dynamics that are present in a person who tests any hypothesis, any discovery, and then as a result of the discovery, finally tests their life to it. Jesus is saying the same thing is involved in trusting in him. We hear the message. We gather the data. We discover who he is. We discover about his love. Discover his will for our lives. We gather all that, but Jesus says that is not enough, even though it is essential. You have to do it. He does not expect you go believe in him without knowing him; but then, finally knowing him as Lord, we then must build on him as Lord. That is a lifelong venture.

I invite you to start it. It begins with single steps. It begins with gathering information about him, finding out who he is. But then boldly finally putting your weight upon him, walking over the gulch, trusting the plank to hold you. And Jesus says, "When you build your house on my rock, the house will stand." Now that is the promise he makes. You have a right to test that out.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for faith, hope and love, these great ingredients of the Christian life. We thank you that we are never asked to believe until we discover your love, but that in discovering your love and discovering the truth that is in Jesus Christ, we simply have to believe. We cannot escape it forever. We finally have to decide whether to trust you or not, whether to build our lives upon that foundation or not. Protect us from the sand. Protect us from all of the superficial options on which we build our lives. May we build our lives upon the Rock. Amen.



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III

"PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD"

"CHRISTIAN HOPE"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Third in a series of four sermons preached at  
First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley

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Romans 1:16, 17

I have been endeavoring to bring into focus experiences we have when we come into the presence of God. What would it be like if I were a Christian and were to experience God's presence? What would be the ingredients of that experience. Our first week together we considered the love ingredient. When we are in the presence of God we experience his love. Last Sunday we endeavored to bring into focus the faith ingredient. When we are in God's presence, faith is another experience we have. Faith is the inseparable mixture of hearing, discovering what is true, discovering the love of Christ, and then building on it.

Now today I want to talk about a third ingredient in practicing the presence of God--the hope ingredient. What does the word hope mean? Love is a past and present experience, but hope says that there is something even more. Faith builds on the events of the past, and existentially in the present wagers my life on the integrity of Christ in the present, but hope is saying even more than faith and love. Hope is saying that not only are these things true, in past and present, but we may count upon the love and faithfulness of God as we look forward to the future. So faith and love have to do with the past and present, hope has to do with the future.

Now hear the Apostle Paul as he puts it in the Colossian letter. Remember the text I read to you some two weeks ago when we began this series? In Paul's letters, both at the beginning and the end in almost every case, he reflects on this trinity of faith, hope and love. Listen to the opening of the Colossian letter. "We always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ [present tense] and of the love that you have for all the saints [present tense]. because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."

I translate that, "We thank God for your faith and your love in the present, and the hope which is ultimately true." That is what he means by in heaven. It is ultimately, permanently true in the future as well as your present experience of faith and love is true in the present. ✓

Listen to that sentence again. "We thank God for your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you. [permanently, ultimately] in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you."

What is hope then? Hope is based on the fact that we count on the love and the faithfulness of God. Therefore our faith is well invested as we look to the future.

I have one other text for us this morning upon which I want to base most of the remarks I have to make. That is the very important opening, a sort of preamble sentence Paul has, to the letter to the Romans where he again expresses the same theme with different language.

In Romans 1:16 Paul gives us a preamble to this whole book. It is a famous, unforgettable sentence. Listen to it: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." By that he means the whole world. It is universally relevant.

"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith." That is through God's faithfulness for our faith. I translate righteousness as the right character of God, the very character of God himself has broken through. He has made himself known to us through his faithfulness for our faith. And then Paul ends that statement with a quotation from the book of Habbakuk in the Old Testament, "As it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'"

That is the future hope, founded upon the sure foundation of God's righteousness, his character and his salvation.

The sentence I want us to reflect on is Paul's saying, "I am not ashamed." That literally in the Greek is, "I am not blushing. I am not embarrassed." Or to put it positively, "I respect the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ for in it is the

power of God unto salvation because in it the righteousness of God has broken through."

"I am not ashamed. I am not embarrassed." Why isn't Paul embarrassed? Why isn't he ashamed? It is because Paul has hope. He has hope as he looks to the future. Why does he have this hope? According to this text, he has hope for two reasons. He has hope first of all because the gospel of Jesus Christ has power to really save. And the second ground of hope, he says, is because in it the very character of God is revealed.

I want us to reflect on those two in some depth. First, let us take a look at the first ground of his hope. Paul is speaking autobiographically at this point. He has told about his own journey--his own experience with other people in the first century world. Paul is saying to the Romans, "In my own journey so far, I have discovered some things to be true. That is why I am not embarrassed. I am not ashamed. I respect the gospel of Christ because I discovered that in the good news of Jesus Christ there is a power that is able to save any one who comes to him--Greek or Jew--no difference."

What does the word "save" mean in the Greek language? The word has a double meaning in the Greek language. We get the English word salvage from this word. It means to mend together or to integrate and bring together fragmented parts. Like a ship at the bottom of the sea that is salvaged and brought up to the surface again and all the loose parts are brought together. It is salvaged. That is one meaning of the word "save." It means to be healed. It means to have all the fragments brought together.

The other meaning of the word is the word safe. To be made at peace. That is a more psychological, subtle understanding of the word save. Salvage--to be made safe, whole, at peace with God and with myself, and with the world around me.

Paul says, I have discovered in my own journey that the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, is able to save who ever comes to him, who ever accepts it, who ever reaches out and takes hold of it. He is able to save, to salvage, to make safe, and because of that, Paul says, "I have confidence for the future." That is a mouthful!

I want us to think that through. What does it mean? What are the implications? Is that the ground of hope for us today in the 20th Century too? I happen to think it is. I think Paul is

right on here. I think you have hope for the future if this discovery is also made in your life and mine. This is what I think Paul is saying to us. When you are faced with a hostile or tragic situation in your own life, when through the bad choices that we make and the options seem to be reduced and we find ourselves hedged in in our family, or in our own life, or with people around us, and we see tragedy on a social scale--what is it that produces despair? Think about it for a moment in your own experience. Usually what produces despair is the bleak numb feeling that begins to come over you that there is no hope; that there is nothing that can change anything. I have talked with lots of despairing people and this is a common ingredient of despair, the feeling that there is nothing really that can happen to change it. Everything is permanently etched in. The bad choices I made, whether it was to get into drugs or alcohol, or to be dishonest, or to get into immorality, cheating on my family, the people who mean the most to me, that now through those bad choices I find myself painted into a corner from which there is no escape. That is despair. When you feel permanently disillusioned there is no hope. This happens to people all of the time.

What then can give us hope as we look to the future and as we face up to the present? Our whole culture has sort of come to this conclusion in an odd sort of way. When we ended the 19th century and went into the 20th century we were a hopeful culture. It was a very shallow hope. It was founded upon a faulty foundation. It was founded upon the foundation of 19th century romantic liberalism. The idea that everybody was basically good; there were no real problems that could not be solved by a little more education. Then progressive education came in to even spruce it up a little more, and that is all the world really needed--a little Western industrialized education and that was going to solve everything. Then World War I started, spawned from the industrial West, not from the ignorant masses, but from highly educated people. And then World War II again from the highly educated intelligentsia and the elite of Europe, and suddenly all of our dreams vanished and went up in smoke, and we then were saddled with disillusionment and despair.

The theology in Protestantism that came

out of the 19th century was the same sort of vapid, shallow stuff. We had eradicated the whole message of the cross. We were just talking about giving good advice to each other and encouraging each other, and God was reduced to a kind of Great Friend or Teacher who gave us good advice to help us on the way. There was no real crisis. And then all these halocaustic events of the 20th century occurred and we lost our nerve, and we should have. We lost our confidence in the shallow message of the 19th century romantic liberalism. The theologian, Karl Barth, wrote a commentary on Romans, and he wrote his theological magnum opus on church dogmatics and broke the bubble in European theology.

An American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr did the same thing for us in American theology. Niebuhr wrote Moral Man, Immoral Society and Nature and Destiny of Man. He broke the myth of how everything was just getting better, and we were just basically good and there were no real problems. Instead he poses the fact that we are in a real jungle. But Niebuhr still could not get the despair out of him.

I remember one incident many years ago when Reinhold Niebuhr first came to Princeton Seminary to give a lecture, and a better theologian than Niebuhr, John McKay, President of Princeton Seminary, was introducing him. Dr. McKay was a very witty man. After being introduced, Niebuhr said, "Ah, John! You have me summed up, that's for sure." Dr. McKay said, "I want to introduce Reinhold Niebuhr, one of America's most gifted theologians. Dr. Niebuhr has discovered in his research that man is in a deep and profound crisis. He has shattered all of the shallow options of liberalism for us and he has shown us that we are in a deep and terrible predicament." McKay was going on and on, he had a way of building this up and was getting very emphatic. "But there is only one problem in Dr. Niebuhr's theology," McKay said as he introduced him to speak, "and that is that Dr. Niebuhr is so convinced of how bad the human crisis is, he is not sure that even God can do anything about it." And with that Dr. McKay sat down and Niebuhr had to stand up. How would you like to stand up and speak after this introduction? Fortunately, toward the end of Niebuhr's life he himself began to discover that God can do something about it.

There would be despair if all we saw was the human crisis. Many of you live with that day in and day out, maybe in your family,

maybe in your work, maybe in your marriage. Seeing a kind of despair because of our own sinfulness that haunts us. Listen to what Paul says, "I have confidence in the future. I have hope." Not because you Roman Christians are so great. Not because the problems are drifting away since education has taken away all the problems. None of that in Paul. He is too wise. He is too realistic for that. "No," he says, "I have hope for the future because I have discovered by experience that God's power, the gospel of Jesus Christ, is able to change human life. I have hope because of the power of the gospel to change human situations, to change your life, to forgive your sins, to set you free from the power of sin and the power of the devil and the power of death." That's why I have hope. I have seen God change lives." And that is Paul's basis of hope as he looks to the future.

I had an experience in Manila that brought this home vividly to me. There was a young man who became one of my very best friends in the time I was in Manila at Union Church. When I first met him, though, I was completely turned off by him. You have probably had those kinds of experiences too. He was an extremely nationalistic Swiss businessman in Manila. In fact he was the manager of one of the large Swiss pharmaceutical firms. I first met him through his wife. He had a lovely wife and two beautiful little children. His wife brought the children to Sunday School, but this man, Kurt, had nothing to do with the church. I first met him one day at the church parking lot. He was just coming by to pick up his wife and children from church. I had to say to myself (in fact, I went home and told my wife,) "I have just met the coldest, most imperial person I have ever met in my whole life." He was absolutely frozen solid toward people. In fact, it was hasseling him in his job. He had almost lost his job as manager in Manila because he could not relate to the warm-hearted interpersonal Filipino managers he had around him. He was so diffident, so hostile to people. He had built up around his life an armor plating, a defense mechanism that no one could get through. I often wondered how he ever got married in the first place, how his wife, Edith, ever got through that. I did not know his story. I did not know why he had these defenses, but he had them. And he made it very clear to me, in that parking lot, he said, "I am picking up my wife. I do not go to church myself. I just don't believe in all this stuff." He said that to me right away before I even said a word. So that was my first impression of him. Then he had an amazing experience. He told me about this afterwards. He was in Taiwan riding a train from Taipei to the

southern port city of Taiwan, and while he was riding in the train he was in deep turmoil. He was looking out of the window. It was not a voice that he heard. It was like a mystical experience he had and a thought literally flashed into his mind while he looked out the window of that train. The thought was that God loved him. He had never thought of that before in his whole life. This was a brand new idea and it literally hit him. Well, it was a shattering experience! He did not know what to do with it. He came back to Manila, and then a series of amazing circumstances all fit together for his life. He told this to his wife. She happened to have on the table that day the service folder from the Union Church of Manila. In that, I was announcing that I was starting a class the next week studying the book, Dogmatics in Outline by Karl Barth, which is Karl Barth's commentary on the Apostles' Creed. I was starting a men's group at six o'clock on Wednesday mornings to study that book. Since Kurt was a Swiss National, all his life, as a boy, he had heard of Switzerland's most famous professor, Karl Barth. He came just for that reason. He never missed a session. He was with me for twenty-one weeks in that first series of studies, and we were studying the great second article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father"-- article one, and the second article, "I believe in God the Son, Jesus Christ." My friend, Kurt, really got the pieces of his faith put together and became a Christian. He accepted Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour of his life.

Well, I want to tell you, in my whole life I have never seen such a change in anyone's life, as in this imperious, dissident, hostile, angry person. It turned out that he had been raised in orphanages in Switzerland, and never had the touch of human love and affection in childhood. He had built defenses against ever being hurt, but Jesus Christ was able to get through in his life and he opened this man up to where he became a warm, gentle, kind person. We have kept our friendship up to this time, and this stony, frozen person has been mellowed and softened by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Listen, men and women, for that reason alone you ought to stay in the Christian

church and stay with the gospel when you see things like that happen. If you do not have hope, you should see some of those things happen. This is what Paul is telling the Christians at Rome. He said, "I have seen some of those things happen. I have seen the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to break through shells and to turn a person who is cold and indifferent, even to his children and to his wife." They were starving emotionally right in front of this man. This person was mellowed because the love of God was able to come into his heart. When you see things like that happen, you have hope for the future. You don't write anyone off. I don't care how deep your problems are. I don't care how impossible your reasons for despair are. Paul tells us, and I believe it, on the basis of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that the gospel is strong enough to change your life. It is strong enough to set you free from fear; to set you free from yourself and from despair, and whatever it is that has you chained. If it is drug addiction, or alcoholism, or selfishness, Jesus Christ can break through. That's what Paul is saying, and when you believe that you look at all of life in a different way. You look at people in a different way. You look at yourself in a different way. You look at the future in a different way. That's Paul's ground of hope.

Remember Eustace in Voyage of the Dawntrailers by C.S. Lewis? Last Spring I read to you that great section where Eustace was undragoned. Remember that marvelous novel by C.S. Lewis in that scene where this little boy, who was a bad boy, becomes a dragon like he really is and he meets Aslan the Christ figure in that novel? He wants desperately to take the dragon off because it is hurting him. It is hurting to be a dragon. His sin and his greed and all is beginning now to hurt, and so he wants so badly to get the dragon off. So Aslan tells him, "Well, take it off--undress." You see the Lord often tells us to repent--to take it off. So Eustace tries. He starts tearing away at the dragon scales. He tears for several minutes and he gets three whole layers of dragon off. It is encouraging at first, but then he looks down and discovers that there is just as much dragon as there was before. You can tear away at the scales of your life from now till you die, and you will never get the dragon off. Finally Eustace is unnerved. He says, "I can't get it off. I have three layers. Look at it. It is even getting knobbier as it gets in deeper," so Aslan says to him, "Lie down and I will undress you." He lies down and Eustace tells Edmund the

story. Remember? He said, "I lay down on the ground, and Aslan with his great claw reached into my dragon skin and I thought his claw was going through to my heart. Then he ripped off the dragon, and threw this tender little boy into the water, and he became a boy again. What God meant him to be, he became. But remember that when he then meets Edmund on the beach, there is a beautiful little dialogue where Eustace says to Edmund, "You know Edmund, this is all so amazing. I wonder if I dreamed it. Did this really happen? Or did I dream it all?" And Edmund who has had his own experience with Aslan in a previous novel (The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe) knows all about it. He was a traitor, remember Aslan had saved him, so Edmund says to Eustace, "Don't worry Eustace, it happened. There are two ways that we know it happened. Firstly, you have clothes on. That did not happen before. You were a dragon before. Now you have clothes on. That's one sign. Secondly, you have been undragoned." Jesus Christ took the dragon off. That's what Paul says is the reason I know this is not fantasy. This is not a dream that is going to pass away, but it is a future hope that I count on. We have been undragoned. Paul says, "I have seen some people undragoned. I have seen Jesus Christ's power save people; salvage broken, fragmented parts and put them together and make a person whole. I have seen them do it."

Now I have to make one last comment, and that is the second ground of Paul's hope, which is the fact that his hope is founded on the unchanging character of Jesus Christ. Notice he says first, I have hope because of the gospel's power, and second I have hope for the future because the righteousness of God has come through and I trust his character. It is a hope founded upon the unchanging character of God.

Remember last week we considered the rock that Jesus says the wise man builds his house upon? Well, let me tell you something folks, that rock is not going to pass away. Though the river rises and breaks its banks, and though the floods come, and though many houses are built on that rock, the rock will stand through many floods and will stand for all times.

That is what Paul is saying is the ground

of our hope; that Jesus Christ who stands at the beginning of history as the Creator and who stands at the center of history as its Redeemer, is the same Jesus Christ who stands at the end of history as its fulfillment. We are not surprised by the floods. We are not surprised by the rainstorms. We are not surprised by the turbulence within upon which we have to live our lives. We keep on building houses; keep on wagering in faith; and we keep on loving, because we have hope that the same Jesus Christ who undergirds us in the present stands at the end of our life, at the end of history. That's hope, and it does not change.

Now what are the implications of that? Believe me, I am very excited about some of the implications that have to do with our world missions, and I want to share those, starting on World Wide Communion Sunday. In fact, I was so stirred up this week working on this that I wrote my sermon for World Wide Communion Sunday two weeks in advance. On that Sunday, we are going to start a series on "The Whole Gospel for the Whole World" to get ready for our World Missions' Conference, and I want to begin on that Sunday using this great hope theme to see the Christian understanding of history itself. That is one implication.

There are lots of implications of hope for the way I live my life right now which are just unbelievable, because I know that God's truth stays, that His truth stands for all time. For those of you who are scientists in this congregation today--those of you who have given your lives, your talents, to the study of science, or research in chemistry, or physics, mathematics, or any field--this means that because Christ undergirds all of history, and because His truth stands, you are stirred up to follow any pursuit of truth knowing that any discovery you can prove is not undone by history. You see how the doctrine of hope makes more meaningful the work you do right now in the present in the field of scientific research.

Did you hear that text we read this morning, Psalm 96? I find that most people never pay attention to a psalm when it is read--but listen to this last stanza of that psalm. Talking about the final judgment of God that psalm says "Let the heavens be glad; and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it." (Talking about the Final Judgment.) That's why we should preserve the whales. Woe unto us, if we let those whales die out there and all the

plankton that needs to support them go and end up in dog food. What a tragedy! We Christians have a basis for ecology now. Anything we do in this world to make these trees stand, the seas roar, and the fish of the sea thrive, any investment we make into what God has given us, (you see that's the stewardship doctrine of the New Testament and Old Testament) into that truth, God will honor. It is an investment into the truth which will stand. Truth does not suddenly evaporate as history moves on. It gives us a basis for honoring the seas that roar: "Then shall all the trees of the woods sing for joy." Good for you foresters! Keep up your work before the Lord comes, for He comes to judge the earth. The idea of judge is to measure and make whole the earth. "He will judge the world with righteousness, and the people with His truth."

In other words, history does not yawn into inky abyss, but history moves toward the fulfillment of the truth of Jesus Christ. We have no basic surprises in store for us when we get to the end of history. The same Jesus Christ we meet there, is the Christ we meet in the presence when we are redeemed by Him, the same Christ who died and rose again, the same Christ by whom the world was made.

Do you see then how the gospel of Hope tremendously enlightens the way we live right now? It enlightens our ethics. It enlightens the way we relate in a family. Anything we do to invest our lives according to the will of the Lord, anything we do that honors His will in life here and now, we have His promise that it will stay. His foundation does not alter. That's the ground of hope, and that's why Paul writes to the Romans "I have all these plans for my life. I want to do all these things. I want to build solidly on the rock." No sleepy admiration for Paul, but a genuine kind of activity spelling out what he has discovered in Jesus Christ, because he has hope and because he knows that God's will lasts. This is the context for our life. Faith, love and hope make life worth living; make it exciting. Amen.

you that our faith and our love that we experience from you are not a passing fancy, not a dream, but it is founded upon the unchanging character of Jesus Christ our Lord, the Rock that will stand, that stays through to the end of all things. Therefore, O Lord, may we as a people build wisely and well upon that Rock. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Heavenly Father as we close this service with a time of prayer, we thank



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IV  
"PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD"

"HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Fourth in a series of four sermons preached  
at First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley.

September 28, 1975

Ephesians 3:14-21

During these weeks of September we have been considering the title of a subject called "Practicing the Presence of God," and today we want to think through the basic question. We have been saying right along in this series what it would be like to be in the presence of God. What are some of the ingredients of that presence: the discovery of His love; the discovery of His faithfulness; and the discovery of the hope we have laid up for us.

Today I want us to begin sort of a basic fundamental question that underlies those three, and that is how does this presence of God become my experience here and now in the twentieth century? In other words, how do we actually come into that presence ourselves so that these great ingredients can be ours? How does a person become a Christian? That's another way of putting this question that we want to talk about today.

I have a text for you. It is a beautiful text in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, third chapter, fourteenth verse. This is Paul's epistle, the letter he wrote to the whole church. He knew it would be circulated in the first century world, but little did Paul probably ever realize that by the witness of the Holy Spirit this book would be included in the canons of Holy Scripture and be read by people, men and women, boys and girls, Christians and non-Christians, through all the centuries. For twenty centuries people have read this prayer of the Apostle Paul before us. It is a prayer as much for us today as it was in 47 A.D. for the church at Ephesus.

"For this reason" Paul writes, "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory (there is that hope) He may grant you to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length, and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasseth knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God." This is the main part of His prayer, and then he closes with a benediction. "Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever. Amen." There is the hope again. Faith, hope, and love. You see those three ingredients alternating in that great prayer of Paul's.

How is Paul's prayer to become a reality in your life so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith? That is literally what the words "presence of God" really mean. To practice the presence of God is to practice the indwelling relationship of your life with God himself. The New Testament is so bold as to affirm that it is possible for you and for me to know God himself. It is possible for Jesus Christ, God's very Speech, to be in your life and to be your companion along the way. This is what it means to be a Christian. How does this take place? I want to speak very basically to you today about how it takes place. How does a person become a Christian? I suppose what we will say now about how we become a Christian, is also how we stay Christian, and how we grow as a Christian. It is interesting that edification teaching in the New Testament and salvation teaching are always the same. What it takes to become a Christian, it takes to stay a Christian. What it takes to discover what it means to be a Christian, to get into the family, is what it takes to stay in the family and what it takes to grow in the family.

I want to share with you three main parts, as I see it, to becoming a Christian. Well, it all begins with hearing about Jesus Christ and finding out who He is in the first place. Two weeks ago when we talked about faith, we quoted to you a wonderful text where our Lord said the same thing. At the close of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man (or person) who built his house upon

the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." Jesus is saying in that text that first, before we can build a house, we have to hear about the rock upon which to build. That's where faith begins. It is where the Christian life begins. It begins with hearing about Jesus Christ. It begins with hearing about His love, hearing about His faithfulness, and hearing about the hope that is laid up for us.

When an inquirer comes to see me, or someone who has been struggling about whether or not to become a Christian, I always encourage them to read the Gospels again themselves. If they have read them before, perhaps as children, or they were read to them, or were forced to read it in a Sunday School class--or maybe they have never read them--I always encourage them to read the Gospel account; to let Matthew, Mark, Luke or John portray to them the message of who Jesus is. Let the text simply unfold before you. Let the text simply win your respect, step by step. Make the New Testament win each step from you, each inch from you. Maybe you start by saying, "Luke (or whoever he is) says Jesus did this. He says he went there. He says he said these things." And gradually what happens is the text makes sense to you, and Jesus Christ is affirmed to you and you discover who He is. You cannot become a Christian without discovering what is central to Christianity--Jesus Christ. Finding out who He is, and what He means--what He means to you--and that is hearing, that is looking, that is considering and discovering who Jesus is.

The next step that occurs--and it happens in different ways and times to different people in different settings--is something like this. The parts begin to come together. They begin to make sense to you. It is almost like a great 1,000-piece interlocking puzzle. You may first of all get the boundary around the edges and then finally as you look at the puzzle the main features of the puzzle come into focus. In every one of these puzzles there is always some part that comes easier than the others--maybe some great ship in the middle of the sea. Unfortunately, in these 1,000-piece interlocking puzzles it seems like about two-thirds of the puzzle is snow or sky or ocean. It is very hard to get together, but in a

sense there are only two basic shapes of each of the puzzle pieces which makes it all the harder, so you have to work with what you can do best. You have to work with the border first, perhaps, and then you are somehow able to put the main feature of the puzzle together. I like to think of that in terms of a parable, the border around the Christian discovery being the Old Testament narrative. The Old Testament narrative is basically the historical narration, which is easy to shape. It is easy to follow, and it makes sense. You can put the border around. Then comes the centerpiece of the puzzle. It is Jesus Christ Himself. He is what draws people to Christianity; not the church. No, that is part of that stormy sea scene. You are a little seasick when you do that part of the puzzle. Lots of people get seasick over the church and never get to the ship. Lots of people are not Christians because they have had some terrible experience in their youth with a cranky Sunday School teacher who was dishonest in his business on the side, and seemed to destroy his whole witness during the week. You found out about it. Or parents who crammed Christianity down your throat, who were really hypocritical. Or an uncle who was the church deacon and was really a phony and you knew it, and so because of these reasons a lot of people have an awful hard time with a lot of the puzzle.

There is only one problem, I would like to say, and that is when you are sixteen or fifteen it seems to me it is valid to say "I cannot become a Christian now because I have these parents who are hypocritical before my eyes; or these friends I know who are talking all this faith but they do not mean it; or an uncle who let me down. I cannot become a Christian now because of this." That may be valid when you are sixteen, seventeen or eighteen; maybe nineteen, twenty or twenty-one and in college now, but it is getting less valid, and you are supposed to be doing your own thinking, putting things together in spite of disappointment by now. Twenty-two, twenty-three, not so valid. Seventy-five years old; not valid at all. How are you going to handle it when you are seventy-five and say "I am not a Christian because my uncle was such a bad man." Does that make sense? No, not at all at seventy-five years old. You can do it when you are sixteen. You cannot do it when you are sixty or fifty or forty or thirty. That is why there are lots of angry old men and angry old women at thirty and forty who are bitter at life because somebody let them

down and they never discover the great center of the puzzle because they are so churned up with the sky and the ocean. They should not have worked on those puzzle pieces until they got the ship clear in focus. Sort of like judging Beethoven by the Milpitas Jr. Hi School performance of the Fifth Symphony. I once said that a few months ago and I got in trouble with a Milpitas listener who told me they have a very good Jr. Hi School Glee Club. But still I do not care how good they are down at Milpitas, that Glee Club simply is not going to do justice to Beethoven. The Jr. Hi Orchestra has been working hard but they will never be able to do justice to the Fifth Symphony. Just like there is not a soul who can do justice to Jesus Christ and to the gospel who lives around your house. You can't do it yourself.

But what happens is that in spite of the disappointment, in spite of a lot of people who let me down, in spite of a lot of things that do not make sense (I have whole parts of the border that just simply don't seem to fit; I have parts of the sea that do not fit in right here; I cannot figure out where heaven fits in; and hell, that has always bugged me, that's over there in that sea) finally the ship comes into focus. I see the Cross and I see the mast, and I see Jesus Christ, and He wins my respect. That's the second stage.

As Karl Barth says in one place: "In spite of a thousand contradictions, Jesus Christ wins my respect." He wins me. He makes sense to me. I have seen a lot of people become Christians. I have yet to see anybody become a Christian because they met a wonderful church and the church won them to Christ. I have yet to see people become Christians because they heard about some signs and wonders other people did. This is always how they become Christians. They become Christians because of Christ. He wins you to Himself. Finally the pieces come together. They make sense. Jesus Christ wins my respect like He won the Apostle Paul's respect. Remember the text I quoted you last week. Paul says as he starts the Romans' letter: "I am not embarrassed because I know the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ." Or to put it another way: "He has won my total allegiance and respect. I know who He is."

Here at last is an understanding of the world that really makes sense. When I get this ship in the puzzle in the right focus, everything around that ship, that mass, now makes sense; even the sea, the sky, the trees and the mountains come into focus. This has happened to a lot of people. This happens to people when they become Christians. Jesus Christ makes sense out of the world. I now see the world was made by His decision. If you want more textual material on this, come to our Session tonight as we look at that Fifteenth verse of the first chapter of Colossians where Paul says in Jesus Christ the world was made, holds together, gets its meaning. In Jesus Christ I see that the world was made by His love and that though I by bad choices and my sin am in deep crisis that same Jesus Christ redeems at the center. He makes whole a broken and fragmented and distorted world, and that Jesus Christ is the one who holds the future of the world in His hands. He gives meaning to this world itself; the whales, as we said last week, the trees, the birds, my life. Can you think of a better world view? Would you rather have the cyclic world view of the Greeks? That is the other great rival to the Christian world, the view of Plato that the world is an endlessly repeating eternal cycle that has no meaning, that the world in its physical nature is only apparent and has no real consequence? It is a stage filled with sound and fury signifying nothing. Therefore, the only solution is some sort of eloquent escape from the world? Is that better? Oh no! The Christian world view makes sense. Jesus Christ wins my respect there and that piece of the puzzle comes into place.

It takes this to become a Christian. You have to make this kind of search. Take a look at who He is and that piece comes into place. Here at last I understand what it means to be a person when I take a look at Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who shows me what I am, what I was meant to be. Isn't this an amazing irony that the Eternal God Himself had to break into human history in the incarnation in Jesus Christ, the second Adam, as Paul calls Him, to show what it meant to be truly human? In our Lord's life, in the way He lived, in the priorities He established He showed the meaning of life and the meaning of personhood. The way He touched other human beings' lives, He showed the meaning of your life, the ground of your worth, how precious you are to Him.

Can you think of another alternative world view

that looks at your personality and shows you the meaning of your life? In Jesus Christ I see who I am. What are you going to do with your sins? What are you going to do with your problems? Pat yourself on the head and say "Boys will be boys, girls will be girls", excuse yourself? Or plunge into despair and live the despair of your own problems, or find somebody else to punish for your problems? No, Jesus Christ gives me a view of selfhood which does not involve escapism (it does not involve unreality, a flight of fantasy) but gives real orientation to face up to my crisis, sees a real fulfillment and repentance and feeling of my sin. Now here at last I see an understanding of my personality that makes sense. This is why I become a Christian. Here at last, I see something big enough and good enough to live for. Everyone of us is spending a large part of our lives trying to find something substantial enough to give our lives to. One of the greatest tragedies of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries is the dream of Karl Marx who saw clearly the punishment and tragedy of life, who saw man's inhumanity to man, who saw the class struggle, but his analysis was too incomplete. He saw the crisis that existed in history, but finally he was only able to advocate a furtherance of that crisis where finally a bourgeois is destroyed in a proletarian state which now takes its place. One of the tragedies of our century is the discovery that the proletariat which takes the place of the bourgeois is not better than the bourgeois it replaced. A circulation of furniture is all that has occurred, and the people who were once up are thrown down and new people are put on top. But the new people who are put on top are just as bad as the old tyrants, because the basic raw human selfishness is still there. No, the crisis that Karl Marx rightly saw in history was far deeper than just between classes. It was a crisis inside the soul of man himself. He never saw that.

What are you going to live for? Marx had something to live for, the Revolution, namely the toppling of oppressive classes. But Jesus Christ gives you something to live for that is infinitely better, more revolutionary, more radical. What are you going to live for? Just things? The collection of things? What are you going to live for? Drugs? The anesthetizing of our brains? The dulling of our lives to

try to live in some sort of fantasy? Jesus Christ gives you something to live for. He assures us of our worth, of forgiveness of our sins, and then of a love that we can share with the rest of the world.

I want to read you a tremendous quotation. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote a book several years ago telling about his own conversion to Christianity. This incredible figure, British writer, journalist, who was Editor of the "Manchester Guardian." He was an atheist for a large part of his life and well into his adult life. Malcolm Muggeridge was actually in Russia doing a story for the "Manchester Guardian" on the Russian Orthodox Church. At the time he was a Communist himself so he had no natural bias toward the church, but things had been welling up in his life. All kinds of people had been getting to him, and when he was in Russia (he tells us in "Jesus Rediscovered") the pieces began to come together. He saw those faces of the Russian Orthodox Christians on an Easter morning when they were worshipping and thanking God for the victory of Jesus Christ. He says that he saw that those faces had seen through the facade of Stalin, that they were right and Stalin was wrong, and that began the breakthrough for Malcolm Muggeridge. Then he did another BBC show down in the Holy Land tracking the life of Christ, and somehow in all of this the pieces came together. The main part of the puzzle became vivid to him, and Malcolm Muggeridge became a Christian. And what a Christian he has been! Somewhat unconventional, believe me! Certainly all of his views are not orthodox, but he has stunned the Christian and non-Christian world with his discovery of the reality of Jesus Christ.

Last year he gave a speech at Regent College in Canada, and this is what that amazing man had to say. His use of the English language is absolutely amazing, beautiful. Listen: "Standing before the Cross our defenses are down; our bluff is called; our alternative pursuits collapse. That's what Jesus does to us. I warn you not to read the New Testament unless you are prepared for a real shock to every one of your pursuits. I say that to myself as well. I warn you Christians when you really stay in relationship with Jesus Christ and continue to really read the New Testament, and to submit yourself to the Sermon on the Mount and to the Apostle Paul, be prepared for all of your pursuits to be called into question." It is tough to be a Christian. It's wonderful, but as Malcolm Muggeridge says, "Standing

before the Cross when your defenses are down; our bluff is called; our alternative pursuits collapse." There we may understand that all power is a sham. All splendor is thorns. All the stains and styles of greatness are so much mockery. There we are made aware at last of our own nothingness which God deigned to put on. That is a tremendous line. God does not just reveal us to ourselves. He does not just show us our shams or the falseness of pursuits; or He does not just call into question our no-gods and our false idols. He identifies with us in the full tragedy of life. He identifies with our nothingness. He shows His omnipotence by His grace. He comes down alongside us. Then Muggerridge goes on: "Standing before the Cross, God's purpose for us is blindingly clear: to love Him, and to love our neighbor, which means everyone without exception. All the eliteness and small circles of selfish clan are now out the window: nationalistic, tribalistic Christianity. When you meet Jesus Christ He calls you to love everyone, because He loves everyone without exception, so that we may be worthy members of the human family whose Father is in heaven and that we may participate in what St. Paul calls 'the glorious liberty of the children of God,' the only true liberty there ever is, ever was, or ever can be."

Well, something like that happens and the pieces come together. Jesus Christ wins you. He makes sense. The great center part of the puzzle becomes clear and vivid, and then there is one more step. I recognize that all this is for me. That is both a salty and a joyous experience. Remember when I did that series on the Holy Spirit last Spring, I said that when the Holy Spirit convicts and convinces us, it is a salty and a joyous experience. That's what I am talking about now. You take a look at Jesus of Nazareth. You spend your whole life doing it, by the way. You take a look at who He is, and then find He makes sense. I can't think of any other world view. Can you? I can't think of any other way of looking at human personality that makes sense, that holds a candle to Jesus' view of personality. I can't think of any other ground of my worth that's better. I can't think of any ethic that is more powerful. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

What a world view! What a way to live! It wins my respect. But there is still one more thing. I have to realize that that Jesus Christ is for me.

I shared with you about a year ago a conversation I had with Francis Schaeffer, the great American apologist for Christian faith, who has a center in Switzerland called L'Abri. He has had a tremendous influence among students world-wide. He has written a number of books, and in a little meeting I was at some time ago he was sharing with us personally about an experience he had, and I shared this with you about a year ago. I want to share it again because what he said is so helpful for this third point. He was sharing that at a talk show. He was at a talk show and this interviewer realized time had gotten away from him, and they were in this sort of a debate. Schaeffer was on one side, and the other man on the other side. Finally, they came to the end of the show, and the talk show host realized that Francis Schaeffer had not had as much time as the other person with whom he was debating, so he said: "I realize that you have not had a chance to speak so I am going to give you one minute here at the very end before the show goes off the air and, Dr. Schaeffer, I am going to let you have the last word. Tell us, Dr. Schaeffer, because we have been talking about Christianity and all, how would you define a Christian? And remember, we only have a minute now for the rest of the show. Dr. Schaeffer said that was really a challenge to him. I have often thought that one of the best ways to get good things out of theologians is to tell them they have to speak quickly and make their point fast. I think that is true of Schaeffer as it is true of a great number of other theologians. Some have even said that to me. Well, he was only given a minute, so he thought to himself 'what in the world will I say? One minute!' He sees the big second hand going around, so he came up with this which he gave on the talk show and then shared it with us. I was very deeply struck by it as a very accurate and helpful description or explanation of what it means to be a Christian. He said: "I define a Christian as follows; a Christian is someone who has bowed twice. He has bowed once in humble admission that he is not autonomous, and he has bowed a second time in grateful thanksgiving to God for redeeming him through Jesus Christ."

Listen folks, that's the third part. The pieces come together and finally I realize it is for me and it is both a salty and a joyous

experience. It is salty because first, I have to feel that I need Jesus Christ or I cannot become a Christian. I cannot grow as a Christian. I cannot be a Christian. I cannot really come to know other people if I don't feel I need them either. This is fundamental. We call it in the Bible, repentance. It is faith. It is bowing first in humble admission that I am not autonomous; in humble admission that I am not the center of the universe; in humble admission that I cannot exist apart from God; in humble admission that there is no hope for me apart from God; apart from my Creator there is no meaning to life itself. It is what Martin Luther meant when he talked about the great phrase extra-neous, realizing that outside myself comes the meaning of my existence; not within myself. That is the difference between Christianity and humanism. Humanism says you get all you need from an inner circle. Christianity says no, the circle itself, the world itself gets its meaning from its author, and that is what Schaeffer meant by the first bow. The first bow is to admit that I am not autonomous; I am not the Lord of my own life; that I need help to make my life whole. The second bow is in grateful thanksgiving to God for redemption in Jesus Christ; for the fact that He has come and He has given life, and He has given meaning to my life in this world; that He has loved me. That's all there is to it. Amen.

We are going to have a moment of silent prayer in which if this is your desire then you make these prayers in your own words.  
Bow once. Bow twice. Amen.

I have a feeling in my heart that there may be some here who have been carrying on a sparring match, a struggle with the Lord maybe for many years of your lives. Maybe you are Christians, maybe you are not. Maybe it has never made sense before, but now I want to ask you this question: On the basis of what you know about Jesus Christ, has enough of the puzzle come together that He makes sense to you, that you are willing to trust His integrity, and then are you willing to bow twice? First in humble admission that you and I are not autonomous, and second, to reach out and take hold of this promise that Paul made that Christ would dwell in our hearts by faith; for faith is reaching out with your heart, bowing twice, asking Christ to be your Lord, to forgive your sins and make you whole.

"On Parable of the Fig Tree."

Earl Palmer  
March 5, 1978

1st Interp in Matthew - Jesus calls into ? what tree has produced in its life. He judges it. There should have been fruit. He creates a catastrophe for the tree - withers it.

- Holy Week brings out failure in man. In spite of all his authority  $\leftarrow$  like the fig tree - lots of leaves but no fruit. ( Pilate - justice fails. Disciples - can't stay loyal )
- The event points beyond itself. It is a lived out parable. Has parabolic impact.
- Mark defends tree. Says it wasn't season for fruit. Jesus asks for much of it. [makes deep impact on Peter] Even men & women functioning at very best are unable to supply what we need most.
- Try as we might, we can't produce from ourselves the thing we most need. - the meaning of existence itself. (We can't produce this "fruit" It's not in us.
- We can't produce from ourselves a love that never fails, that really endures. (don't have this "fruit")
- We need forgiveness, but don't have ability to forgive ourselves. Grace conferred on ourselves is cheap grace. (don't have this "fruit")

This crisis is what Jesus is healing.]]

On holy week - Jesus is healing our  
inability to love, forgive, find a  
lasting purpose in life.

He shakes the foundations of every thing -  
so we can be helped. Jesus created a  
crisis + revealed the inability of the  
tree to produce fruit.

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3/12/78 sermon - reference to above.

Jesus is the fig tree who must be struck down  
(not us.) - He acts out the parable of the  
fig tree. He not us, is struck down.

Christ dies but is victorious over death.

It happens because the shepherd loves the sheep.

The good news = God so loved the world he  
gave his only son.

After we contemplate this about our shepherd -

We respect + believe him  
we face him, we trust him  
Tears are all right.



# PRESBYTERIAN MESSENGER

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BERKELEY  
MORNING WORSHIP AT 9:00 AND 11:10  
BROADCAST 9:00 AM KGO AM 810 KC

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 12, 1978

PRELUDE: "Legende" . . . . . Louis Vierne

CHORAL CALL TO WORSHIP

\*HYMN OF PRAISE: "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" . . . . . No. 409  
"He will guide us even unto death." Psalm 48:14

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: (unison) "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy Holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." *THE HYMNBOOK*

\*\*DECLARATION OF ASSURANCE

ANTHEM: "Go Ye Into All the World" . . . . . Butler  
(*Dawn Treaders; Kay Godden, piano*)

\*\* OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: Isaiah 53:1 - 6 . . . . . page 633

PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE

OFFERTORY: "Ride the Chariot" . . . . . Smith  
(*College Choir; Tom Fitch dir.; Mary Clark, solo*)

\*HYMN OF PREPARATION: "O God of Earth and Altar" . . . . . No. 497  
"The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob  
our high stronghold." Psalm 46:11

\*\*\*A TIME FOR YOUNG DISCIPLES

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON: Mark 14 . . . . . page 882

THE SERMON: "JESUS ON TRIAL" . . . . . Rev. Earl F. Palmer  
(*9th in a series on the Gospel of Mark*)

\*CLOSING HYMN: "Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;  
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;  
Thou my great Father, I thy true son;  
Thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one."

LORD'S PRAYER

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE: "Toccata in G Major" . . . . . Walond

\*Congregation standing \*\*People seated by ushers  
\*\*\*Children grades 1-5 leave for Christian Ed. 9:00

FROM THE MINISTER -

100 years ago on March 31, 1878, a group of Christians in Berkeley were first organized as the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley. March 31 of this year begins our centennial year, and I want to inform each of you of the first occasion of that centennial observation. It will be on Friday evening, March 31. The Session has set that date for our Annual Meeting of the Congregation. The occasion will be a beautiful evening. There will be a dinner, and the election of Elders, and Deacons, and the printed Annual Reports will be available.

The evening is under the direction of the Special Committee on the Centennial Year, under the direction of chairperson Howard James. Please be sure to set aside this evening for a meaningful time of fellowship.

Your pastor,

*Earl Palmer*

MARINERS CLASS

This morning Dr. Robert St. Clair will discuss "Living Theology." Next week, March 19, Jim Rhodes will continue with his discussion of "Pilgrim Experiences."

NEEDS/RESOURCES BOARD

Please read over the Needs/Resources Board, located just outside the Christian Education Office. Posted there are jobs, housing needed and offered, needs of various people, maybe you can be of help to someone, or maybe they can be of help to you. There are several handicapped people in the area who could really use some regular help, and have the ability to pay for regular care. Just take a few minutes to read over the listings there.

LENTEN FORUM SERIES

Berkeley Y.M.C.A., 2001 Allston  
Tuesday, March 14 - "The Power of Labor" Tuesday, March 21 -  
"The Power of Laughter"  
\$3.00 for breakfast  
Speaker: Rev. Herbert Leslie  
Theme: "To Empower Persons"  
From 7:30 to 8:30 a.m.

IN MEMORIAM

William R. Robie . . .  
February 24, 1978  
A member here since 1941.  
"I go to prepare a place for you,  
I will come again and will take  
you to myself, that where I am  
you may be also."

John 14:3

UPW CIRCLE MEETINGS - MARCH 16

CIRCLE 1 - Mrs. Paul Davis, Ch.,  
and hostess, 803 Terra Calif.  
Dr. #4, Entry 6, Walnut Creek,  
376-2294; Bring a sandwich

CIRCLE 2 - Mrs. Milton Watt, Ch.  
Hostess: Mrs. Charles Murray  
1307 Dwight Way, Berk. 845-8846  
Co-Hostess: Mrs. Margaret Clark  
Bring a sandwich

CIRCLE 3 - Mrs. John Miller, Ch.  
Hostess: Mrs. Lawrence Walters  
986 Overlook Rd. Berk. 848-8850  
Co-Hostess: Mrs. Karl Rupp  
Bring a sandwich

CIRCLE 4 - Mrs. R.J. Hopkins, Ch.  
Hostess: Mrs. Marvin Anderson  
5739 La Salle Ave. Oak. 339-8756  
Co-Hostess: Mrs. Ed Foskett  
Bring a sandwich

CIRCLE 5 - Mrs. Margery Wolf, Ch.  
Hostess: Mrs. John Evans  
2627 Etna St. Berk. 843-9745  
Co-Hostess: Kathy Juhl

CIRCLE 6 - Mrs. H.E. Nisson, Ch.  
Meet at the church at noon  
Bring a sandwich

IRAN/MID-EAST

Prayer Group will meet March 18  
at the home of Don Roberts. Pot-  
luck dinner at 6 p.m. Call Anne,  
525-8255, for food assignment.  
Our special guest will be Gary  
Allan of Campus Crusade, who will  
have slides to share with us. We  
also welcome Ida Laurenta and  
Jim Samland of Campus Crusade with  
the foreign students staff.

NURSERY PARENTS NOTE!

Because the space and equipment in  
our church nursery is designed for  
very young children and babies,  
parents are asked to not bring  
children over 4 years of age. Fri-  
day nursery hours have changed to  
9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING

This is the time of the year  
when we try to help world hunger  
and other urgent needs that come  
to our attention. One Great Hour  
of Sharing offering will be re-  
ceived on Easter Sunday, or can  
be handed in to the church office  
at any time. Use the envelopes in  
your packet specially marked, or  
those in the pew racks marked for  
"One Great Hour of Sharing."

SUNDAY SCHOOL SNACK SHACKS

Each Sunday School child will be  
bringing home a snack shack.  
Please encourage your children to  
use this prayerfully and thank-  
fully during the next few weeks.  
The snack shack boxes should be  
returned on Sunday, April 2. Feel  
the need--share the gift.

ANNUAL CONGREGATIONAL MEETING  
AND DINNER

This year our Annual Congregational  
Meeting will be a very special one.  
In addition to the election of  
church officers, we will also be  
celebrating the Centennial of our  
church. The date is Friday, March  
31. More details next week.

SESSION AND NEW MEMBERS

There will be a soup and sandwich  
luncheon today with new members  
in Geneva Hall, immediately after  
the 11:10 a.m. worship service.

IN MEMORIAM

Edna Louise Foskett  
February 23, 1978  
Mother of Elder Edwin Foskett  
"Surely goodness and mercy shall  
follow me all the days of my life:  
and I will dwell in the house of  
the Lord forever." Psalm 23



Palms Sunday -  
3/19/78  
Rev. Earl Palmer -

- Before Jesus rode in on donkey - Both Herod & Pilate (who had to stay in Herod's old palace) had had "triumphant" processions into Jerusalem. No record of people coming out to greet or cheer them.
- Then Jesus comes - riding on donkey - People all reach out with palm fronds. (symbol of salvation), crying Hosanna which in Aramaic means "Save us, help us" - not praise the Lord - which would be "Halleluyah".
- There were 3 threads in the expectations among the Jewish people. They yearned for:
  - ① (like Abraham) a father figure - the identity thread. People were yearning for identity.
  - ② - a deliverer - like Moses who delivered them from Egypt. They needed to be delivered from bondage from themselves.
  - ③ - a divine - more mystic thread - they ~~long~~ yearned for fulfillment, for happiness.
- Jesus - fulfills the convergence of the 3 threads. He fulfilled & surprised them in 1 expectation. No one expected a suffering servant, they were looking for a King. He surprised them & yet fulfilled their yearnings for a King, a deliverer, a father.

Today - we all have yearnings -

- ① - Identity - discover who you really are.
- ② - Deliverance - from tyrannies; from self.
- ③ - Happiness - freedom, love, to be loved, self expression.

Where do we find convergence of this fulfillment of these yearnings - In ourselves? our tribe? our nation?

Palm Sunday is for us - a moment in history

For once in their lives, a whole gp. of people recognized Jesus as a fulfillment of all their yearnings. (even tho they fought hi.)

He was the door - thru which we can pass to live more abundantly.

On Palm Sunday - The people saw This!

Easter Sun. Mar 26, 1978. What the Resurrection Means to us.

- ① - It means total help for total need. It means my real self (not just my soul) is beloved. That wholly belovedness is victorious over guilt, failure, etc... He won a victory over our failures. He defeated the foe, the failure, he disarmed death.
- ② It means worth of human history is settled. It was a victory on behalf of the whole created order. Our hope for the future God will raise up & fulfill the word. Now we have a basis for caring for this present order. Nothing is as for this historical order is meaningless. The resurrection is our seal of it.
- ③ - Authority of our Lord's ministry is settled. We can count on Jesus' his love his promises. He can back them up. It means Jesus Christ is our contemporary today, because he is alive. "I am with you always, even unto the end of the age." Resurrection seals that for us. Read Mark.

Trust it!  
Trust it!  
Trust it!  
Trust it!